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KERALA

A Portrait of the Malabar Coast

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KERALA

A Portrait of the Malabar Coast

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PREFACE

Mahabali's Return

On the Malabar Coast, as August nears its end, the monsoon rains are ceasing and the humid heat of midsummer gives way to the pleasant warmth of Keralan autumn, though there is no flaming fall of leaves to mark the change of seasons in a land always and abundantly green. This is the first month of the traditional year in Kerala, the month of Chingam, when the main harvest is gathered in the coastal paddies and in the narrow valleys snaking up between the burning foothills of red laterite towards the Western Ghats. It is the month for the celebration of Onam, the principal festival of the Malayalis, as the people of Kerala call themselves.

Onam is the year's great fertility rite, the ceremony of gratitude for the never-failing fruits of a tropical climate, but it is also a festival that re-enacts one of the most important legends of the Malayali people. On the eve of Thiru Onam, the second day of the festival, ziggurat-like structures of flowers are placed in the entrances to Keralan houses; these are intended to welcome, on his annual return the following morning from the underworld, the legendary king Mahabali, who ruled over Kerala in the golden age before caste existed, when all men were equal, no man was poor, 'and there was neither theft nor dread of thieves'.

The story of Mahabali is a peculiarly Keralan and non-Brahminical adaptation of the story of the fifth incarnation of the god Vishnu. In the orthodox version, which dates back to the Rig Veda, long before the cult of Vishnu reached South India, Mahabali appears as the demon king Bali, of the race of the Asuras, who becomes a yogi so powerful in his magic that he gains control over the earth, and even the gods feel themselves

threatened. The Lord Vishnu is deputed to save the Brahminical deities from this titanic magician, and he assumes the form of the pathetically ugly and comical dwarf Vamana, who one day appears before Bali as a holy beggar and asks a boon—the gift of as much land as he can cover in three paces. When Bali unsuspiciously agrees, Vamana begins to stride, and even as he makes the first step he grows into a being so gigantic that in his three paces he encompasses the whole earth, and the demon king Bali is forced to retreat to the infernal region, the only kingdom that is left to him.

In Kerala the whole perspective of this ancient legend is changed, for Bali becomes Mahabali, the Great Bali, who ruled his realm so well that he aroused the jealousy rather than the fear of the gods, and who gave up his kingdom, not because he was the victim of a trick, but because he was too generous to refuse a request and too honourable not to fulfil a promise. As he withdrew into the underworld, victim of the malice of the gods, he asked one boon for himself, which was granted: that on a single day each year he might be allowed to return and to see how his beloved children, the Malayalis, were faring. That day is Thiru Onam, and Mahabali's ghostly but amiable presence is greeted by a special feast of boiled bananas and by the exchanging of gifts, while in the king's honour the girls put on white skirts and coloured blouses, and dance with flowers in their hair. At the same time the Nairs, the traditional warrior caste of the Malabar Coast, stage sword-fights, and in the wide backwaters the young men race the great snake-boats, the *chundan valloms*, with their tall ornamental sterns and their hundred paddlers, whose very name and form look back to the age when the gods of the Brahmins were still unknown in Kerala and the people worshipped the Nagas, the serpent deities who lived, like King Mahabali, in the underworld.

The story of Mahabali is a fragment of mythological history, representing the conquest of the native Dravidian culture by the advent of the Aryan teachers from the north who brought with them the Vedic religion and the Sanskrit language, and who imposed on southern India a caste system which had not existed

before they came, but which has proved durable enough to bedevil the politics of Kerala even in the mid-20th century. The legend, in other words, presents the Dravidian version of a great social transformation which took place before the historical records began, and this is one of the reasons why King Mahabali, despite the fact that he incurred the wrath of the great gods, is still affectionately remembered by the ordinary people of Kerala as a personification of the losing side in the struggle between cultures.

But there is another aspect to the Onam festival than either the forgotten history it revives or the universal symbols of fertility with which it links Mahabali and his legend. To educated Malayalis—and that means a majority in a state which has long cherished the highest literacy rate in all India—Mahabali is no more a figure of past or present reality than Santa Claus is to us. Yet they still celebrate his festival as richly as they can afford, partly because of the sentiments of brotherhood and good fellowship which the idea of Onam, like the idea of Christmas, generates, but also with an almost magical feeling that in some way what they do on the day when Mahabali returns may bring a gleam of his golden age into a time in which, for most Keralans, life shows its feet of clay.

I begin with Mahabali, because in its own way the story of the good king's annual return poses the questions with which this book is concerned. If, by some magic of his devotees' imagination, Mahabali could really be brought back to make his spectral journey in the flowery month of Chingam, what would he find among his people? He would not see much prosperity, for Kerala, so lush in appearance, is the poorest state of India, and he would find no more equality and not nearly as much happiness as he would remember from that misty past, aeons ago, before Vishnu came to play his tricks. On the other hand, he would find that life in this tiny state had taken on over the centuries an unexpected variety and complexity; he would find it interwoven with strange strands, religious and political, derived from cultures of the many peoples who came sailing over the Arabian Sea to trade and settle on its coasts. And he would be fascinated,

though appalled, by the life his people now follow, so restless and yet in many ways so conservative, and lived so precariously between the menacing Scylla of political disunity and the engulfing Charybdis of economic want.

My own observations of Kerala, on which I largely base this book, have been, like those Mahabali might be supposed to make, transient yet concerned—the observations of a committed stranger. My wife and I first visited Kerala during the winter between 1961 and 1962 when I gathered the material for *Faces of India*; my first impressions of the Malabar Coast and its hinterland are recorded in that book. In 1965, when my publishers and the Canada Council provided the encouragement and a great deal of the means to make a second and more deeply exploring journey to Kerala, my wife and I went willingly, she as photographer, I as writer.

For the three months of a Malabar winter, reaching well into 1966, we travelled over Kerala, which is about half the size of Scotland, visiting the small cities and many of the enormous villages, melting invisibly into each other, which are characteristic of that region of rural over-population. We travelled by jeep into the mountain jungles and by launch along the great backwaters, and we visited many places which we might easily have missed had not Captain Hariharusubramony, the Director of Tourism for Kerala, placed a car and a driver at our disposal for periods of weeks at a time. Captain Hari, as he preferred to be called, had been forewarned of our coming by one of my friends in Delhi, and he came down to meet us at the Trivandrum airport, a tall, soft-spoken Brahmin who had once been aide-de-camp to the Maharaja of Travancore; with his introductions, which soon bred others, our inquiries in Kerala began. The Keralans who helped us with information, and were often movingly hospitable, are far too numerous to be listed individually; they included Brahmins and outcastes; Vedic scholars and food-gathering tribesmen, poets and doctors, elephant-watchers and keepers of palm-leaf archives, industrialists and rice-farmers. Nestorian priests and Sephardic elders, former Maharajas and Communist leaders who ironically outranked them in caste,

bishops and descendants of the Prophet, professors and newspaper editors, the latest in gurus and the last of the sahibs. I thank them collectively and warmly.

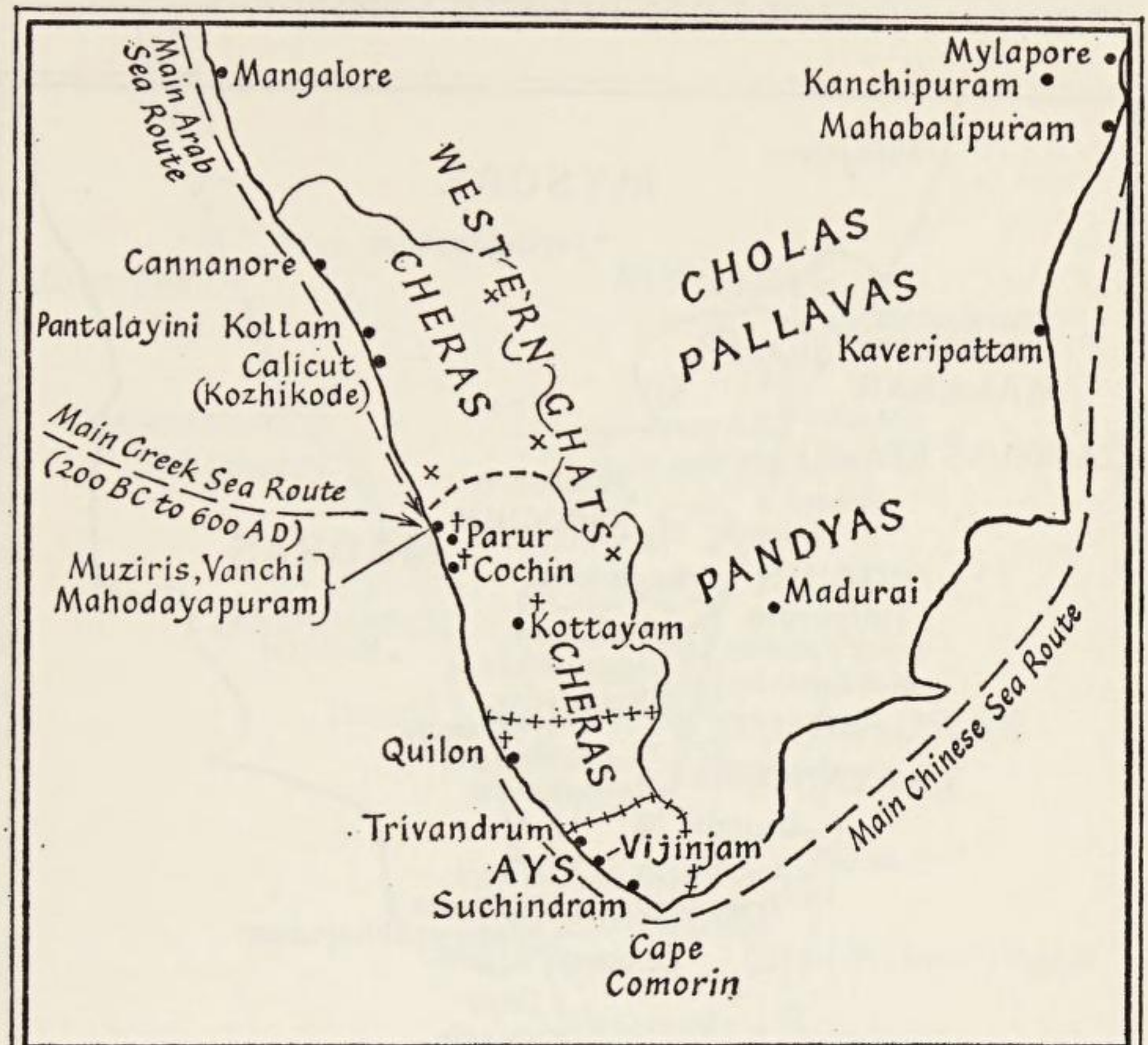
One quality which the Malayalis lack completely is reticence, so that the sources of oral information were always copious and easily tapped. On the other hand, it is no exaggeration to say that there are as many shades of opinion as there are literate inhabitants. 'We are like grains of sand, separate and ever shifting,' one Malayali writer said to me. I even found in Kerala a phenomenon I have encountered nowhere else: Communists proud of their internal disagreements, which they quoted to me as evidence of the inner independence of all Malayalis. Yet this, as one soon discovers, is only one side of the Malayali character. Despite their intellectual individualism and their predilection for political change, the people of Kerala are highly group-conscious and, in their own way, traditionalist.

The unusual combination of independent opinions and emotional loyalty to caste and community traditions is compounded by a politeness—or perhaps it is pride—which makes a Keralan prefer to give a misleading answer rather than none at all. Thus it was necessary for us to double-check any information we were given, and also to accord a special importance to the opinions of strangers. In particular, I was given many provocative views of Keralan life and especially of Keralan politics by journalists and officials from the neighbouring state of Madras, who combined a sympathetically southern attitude with a rather cool objectivity in observing their neighbours over the mountains. The surviving British planters and merchants were frankly biased against the new Indian order, but even they had some interesting things to say about the changes which had taken place in Kerala since 1947. Finally, among Norwegians, Swiss and Canadians working on foreign aid projects I encountered surprisingly dispassionate opinions on the political and economic problems of Kerala.

These many and various views have in the end made personal interpretation mandatory. And so, as I describe the state of Kerala and its people; as I record the past and bridge with con-

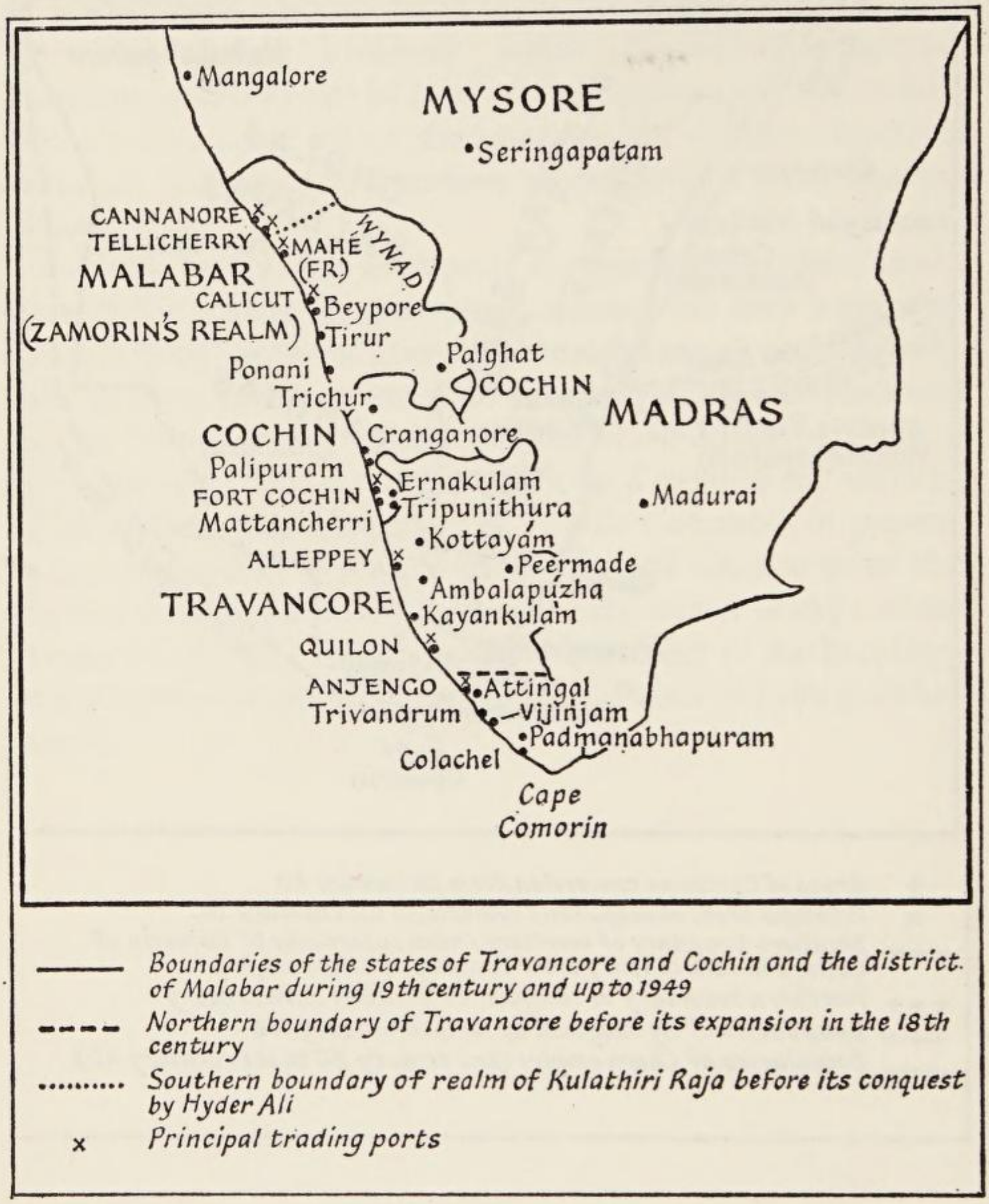
jecture the lacunae caused by the scarcity of records among a people only recently convinced of the use of history; as I discuss the contemporary problems which—despite their special character—make Kerala so much the microcosm of India; I shall follow a method in which the impressionist and the objective, evocation and opinion, combine to delineate a many-faceted subject.

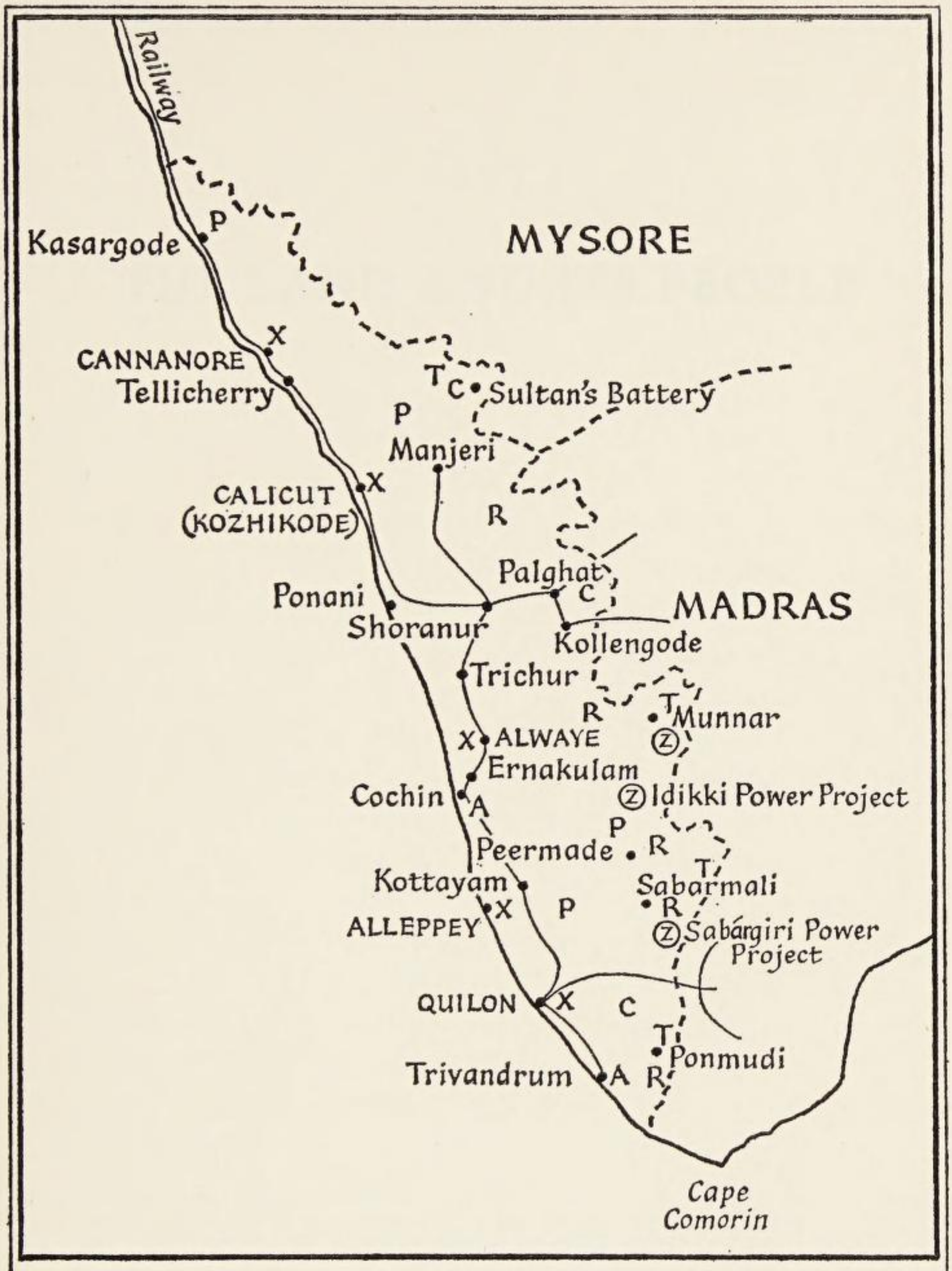
I would, finally, like to express my gratitude to the Canada Council for once again generously assisting me with a grant to travel to India (previous grants had enabled me to write *Faces of India* and *The Greeks in India*), to the Asian Studies Department of The University of British Columbia for kindly making a supplementary grant from its research fund towards my work in Kerala, and to The University of British Columbia in general for so co-operatively accepting my physical absence from the editorial desk of *Canadian Literature* for the winter of my travels. Thanks are also due to the Kerala Department of Archaeology for permission to take photographs in the Palace of Padmanabhapuram.



+ *Areas of Christian conversion, from 1st century AD*
× *Principal areas of megalithic remains, to 2nd century BC*
– – – *Southern boundary of territory under suzerainty of Zamorin of Calicut in 12th century after breakup of Chera empire*
+ + + *Northern boundary of kingdom of Venad in 12th century*
+++++ *Boundaries of Ay kingdom up to 9th century AD*
——— *Boundaries of Chera empire (2nd century BC to 12th century AD)*

2: KERALA IN THE AGE OF MODERN PENETRATION





X *Main industrial centres*
R *Rubber plantations*
T *Tea plantations*
P *Pepper growing*
C *Coffee plantations*
A *Airports*
Ⓩ *Hydro-electric power projects*

PART I

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

I

Untypical India: A Preliminary Diorama

NEXT to distant Nagaland, which it resembles in remoteness and political instability, Kerala is the smallest state of India. It lies in the far south-western corner of the country, a long fish-shaped land squeezed between the ranges of the Western Ghats and the beaches of the Arabian Sea. From its northern extremity, where it borders the Konkan district of Mysore, to the south, where a narrow spur of Madras bars it from Cape Comorin, the farthest promontory of India, it covers about 360 miles of coast-line. The crest of the mountain chain called the Western Ghats narrows its breadth to 20 miles at the northern and southern extremities, but in the centre it is 75 miles wide from the palm-shaded seashore of Cochin to the border of Madras, at this point overshadowed by the bald, blunt summit of Kerala's highest mountain, Anamudi, the Elephant's Head, 8,841 feet above sea level. Narrowness cancels out the effect of length; the total area of Kerala is 15,002 square miles, just over 1 per cent that of India as a whole; almost a third of it consists of forests and mountain wastes. Yet no less than 18 million Malayalis live there, which means that into this tiny corner of territory are packed 4 per cent of all Indians, at the rate of 1,200 to every square mile, including jungle, rock and inland water. Kerala is the most heavily over-populated region in an over-populated land, and in other directions it reveals the familiar problems of India carried to their extremity; it has proportionately more unemployment and underemployment and for centuries it has suffered from a more acute shortage of home-grown food than any other part of hungry India.

But only from a distance, by ignoring much that is essential, can one view Kerala as no more than a microcosmic model of India and its problems. India is not a single, uniform land. It is a conglomeration of regions and peoples, and even to other Indians, once they cross its borders, Kerala seems a strange and foreign country. Its small, dark, Dravidian people bear little resemblance in features and physique to the Indo-Aryans of northern India; they even dress differently, and speak a language peculiar to their own narrow strip of territory. Malayalam is a Dravidian tongue but it differs considerably even from the related Tamil of Madras and it has no relationship at all to the Hindi which north Indians hope eventually to make the national language of their country. The difference in language is important, not only because it isolates the Keralan, who can normally communicate with another Indian only by using an unIndian language, English, but also because it provides the basis on which Kerala came into existence as a modern state.

Kerala was born (or resurrected if one takes a historical view of the process) in 1956 on the crest of the movement for linguistic states that swept over India in the decade after independence. It was formed out of a number of political units with varied histories, all of which had been in existence for at least a hundred and fifty years. To the old princely state of Cochin, which dates from the early Middle Ages, and the larger kingdom of Travancore, welded out of a number of smaller principalities by the conquering Raja Martanda Varma in the 18th century, was added the Malabar district of the state of Madras, the former kingdom of the Zamorin of Calicut which had been ruled directly by the British since 1791, and the long coastline was filled in by the inclusion of a number of relics from a long-past age of trading, such as the former East India Company posts of Fort Cochin and Anjengo, and the tiny French enclave of Mahé to the north of Calicut. In the enthusiasm for linguistic homogeneity that prevailed in 1956, the rich paddy lands around Cape Comorin, the granary of the old state of Travancore, were abandoned to Madras solely because a majority of their people spoke Tamil, and this quixotic consistency has had a serious

effect ever since on the already strained food supplies of Kerala. The only district that remained without a Malayalam-speaking majority was the small tea-growing region of the High Range, around Munnar, where the plantation workers are landless peasants who have come over the crest of the range from the state of Madras.

Ten years ago it seemed to Indians as though the linguistic state was the ideal solution to the problem of reconciling unity with diversity in a country whose people belonged to many cultural and many racial strains. But there are other traditions as divisive as those of language, and during the decade since 1956 the differences in experience between Cochin and Travancore on the one hand, governed for centuries by benevolent despots, and Malabar, where British forms of administration inevitably brought with them British political traditions, have been more sharply felt than the architects of a united Kerala had anticipated. People who come from the northern and southern halves of the Malayali state are conscious of their social and temperamental differences, and are disposed to be censorious of each other on these grounds.

On my first day in Trivandrum, the former capital of Travancore and now the state capital of Kerala, I was told by a government official who had held a high position in the Maharajah's government that the economic and political troubles of Kerala were due to the incorporation of Malabar, an educationally and economically backward region, where the kind of high culture fostered by the native princes, who were devoted patrons of the arts and of learning, had not developed.

Several weeks later, on my first day in Calicut, the capital of Malabar, I visited K. P. Kesava Menon, one of the pioneers of Congress in South India and a founder of Aikya Kerala, the movement for a Malayali state whose aims were achieved in 1956. Kesava Menon, once a prolific journalist and the most powerful among the editors of Malayalam newspapers, and now a blind but extraordinarily vigorous octagenarian, told me that he was not satisfied with the state as it had worked out. In his view the disruptive elements were to be found, not in the north,

but in the south, in the former princely states. He portrayed the people of Malabar as law-abiding and peaceful by nature, while the people of Travancore and Cochin were turbulent and given to mob action: as honest, straightforward and heirs to the best in the democratic traditions of Britain, while the southern Malayalis were devious and subtle, marred by all the servile habits that stem from feudal rule and the tradition of patronage. It was unfortunate, he suggested, that the capital should have been established in the effete atmosphere of Trivandrum, three hundred miles from Calicut and near the far southern boundary of the state. Had it been placed in Calicut, or at least in the commercial city of Ernakulam midway between the frontiers, the brief history of the state might have been far less troubled.

In Kerala the division between north and south has its historical foundation in the medieval period, when the Zamorins of Calicut, rulers of Malabar, engaged in a struggle with the rulers of Cochin, and eventually those of Travancore as well, over the hegemony of Kerala. Yet even the claims of the Zamorins to the overlordship of Kerala looked back to an earlier period of political unity, which began before the Christian era, when the Kings of the Chera dynasty ruled the region between the Ghats and the Arabian Sea. With the Pandyas of Madurai and the Cholas of Kanchipuram, the Cheras formed a triarchy of Dravidian ruling houses whose rival claims kept South India in a state of intermittent warfare for more than a thousand years.

The very antiquity of the name which has been revived in the modern state of Kerala suggests that the unity and the uniqueness of the region were long recognized by other Indians. In the 3rd century B.C. the Greek Megasthenes went as envoy from Seleucus I to the court of Chandragupta Maurya at Pataliputra in the Ganges valley, and there, though he never travelled to the south, he heard from his Indian acquaintances about that distant region. In his account of India which survives fragmentarily as quotations in the works of later Alexandrian writers, Megasthenes refers to a kingdom of the *Charmoe*, next to the kingdom of the *Pandoe*, and many scholars now take these names to mean

the neighbouring southern states of the Cheras and the Pandyas. In the reign of Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka, shortly afterwards, Indians in the north were certainly aware of the political divisions in the Dravidian south; in his Second Rock Edict, carved in the middle of the 3rd century B.C. Ashoka refers specifically, in a list of independent neighbour kingdoms stretching as far as Ceylon, to Keralaputra.

Thus the name Kerala emerges into the dim glimmer of early Indian history about 2,200 years ago, but where it originated is still uncertain. I have heard it interpreted, on the basis of similarity to ancient Tamil words, as Land of Coconuts, and Land of Mire (a reference to the precious silt of the backwaters), but the most likely explanation is still that offered by the German missionary, Dr. Gundert, author of the classic 19th-century Malayalam-English dictionary, who suggested that Kerala is merely a derivation of Cheralam, meaning realm of the Cheras.

Nothing is known of the origins of the Chera dynasty which so long ago defended the mountain barriers of a kingdom that covered very much the same ground as modern Kerala, but something of the nature of their culture may be gleaned from brief references in the great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, where the Cheras are classed, along with Greeks and Sakas, among those degraded races who illustrate the degeneracy of the age of Kaliyuga. Since these references mention peoples like the Sakas who reached India in the 1st century B.C., they were obviously interpolated relatively late into the constantly changing structures of the epics, not finally stabilized until about the 4th century A.D. But at least they establish that round about two thousand years ago, when Greek and Saka invaders were still active in northern India, the Cheras (and here the references seem to imply a whole people rather than a mere dynasty) were known and were clearly so different in character from the Indo-Aryans of the North that they were not yet regarded as having any true part in the fabric of Hindu religion and custom.

Even today, Kerala is socially heterodox in Indian terms. Its caste system, though it developed an extraordinary complexity, lacked elements which were present in most other parts of India

(for example, there were hardly any chiefly Kshatriyas and no merchant Vaisyas at all), but at the same time it introduced refinements of caste pollution unknown elsewhere, such as the extraordinary rule by which the beggar Nayadis were not merely untouchable but unseeable, and had to earn their livings by calling for alms out of the concealment of roadside bushes. Even more unusual in patriarchal India, until a generation ago the majority of Malayali Hindus lived according to a matrilineal joint family system which embodied the practice of polyandry. Even now that system has not completely broken down, and it legally governs the inheritance of ancestral as distinct from personal property: a daughter and all her children inherit equal shares in such property, but the son only inherits his own share and his children must inherit through their mother's family. But probably the most important effect of the matrilineal system is that it has left Malayali women with an influence and an independence of outlook which one will not find anywhere else in India south of the Tibetan-influenced regions on the Himalayan frontiers: in particular, by maintaining a position for the woman within her own family, it has prevented widowhood from becoming the sordid tragedy which it was—and to a great extent still is—in other Hindu societies.

Such aspects of Malayali life, which later I shall explain more closely, have made Kerala in many ways a backwater of regional conservatism even in conservative India, but the orientation towards the past is combined with an extraordinary receptiveness to new and alien ideas. In Kerala one soon becomes aware of a peculiarly dynamic relationship between the native and the universal, which arises historically from the fact that for at least two millennia the Malabar Coast has experienced a series of intrusions by sea from the Middle East and from Europe more varied and more numerous even than those endured by the Punjab, through which the northern invaders always rode into India. The intrusions into Kerala differed from those into the Punjab since more often than not they were entirely peaceful. They began, as I shall show, at the very time when Aryan influences first penetrated southward through the land mass of

India to reshape Malayali society into the semblance of an orthodox Hindu culture, and the interplay between these two currents of influence, sea-borne and land-borne, has continued ever since.

Certainly from the days of Cleopatra, and probably long before her time, the traders from the West had been coming to Kerala, first down the pirate-ridden Konkan coast and later, after the discovery of the monsoon winds, straight across the Arabian Sea. The claim of the Phoenicians, whom some historians regard as the first Levantine visitors to the Malabar Coast, is based on the shadowiest of conjectures, and it is much more likely that the Arabs were the earliest traders who were attracted to Kerala by the abundance of spices and particularly of pepper, whose cultivation its warm humid climate, favoured. From the Greeks of Alexandria, who provide our first reliable historical data on the region, the succession of visitors has been continuous, through the Romans, the Moslems of Egypt and Persia, and the Chinese, down to the Italian travellers who renewed the European connection as early as the 13th century, followed by the modern line of traders—Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danes; finally, most tenacious and influential of all, the British came as merchants but, as everywhere in India, stayed to become imperial rulers on an even more thorough scale than the Moghuls. Directly in Malabar and indirectly in the princely states, they presided over the fate of Kerala from 1791, when Tippu Sultan's invading army from Mysore was driven back over the Western Ghats by the East India Company's forces, to the final and peaceful liquidation of the British Raj in 1947 and the incorporation into the Republic of India of the native states it had protected.

In many directions—economic, religious, cultural and political—the two millennia of foreign contacts played their part in shaping Kerala's way of life and its peculiarly pluralistic society. Economically, as a result of them, the region came to resemble Malaya much more than it did the rest of India, developing a plantation system in the foothills and even in the coastal areas a form of agriculture based on cash crops for exports. Pepper, ginger and cardamom, followed by coir and copra, rubber and tea, dominated the farming economy of Kerala, and led to the

creation of an elaborate system of inland water transport to bring export goods down to the little ports strung along the coast, so that one of the most characteristic aspects of the Malabar scene is provided by the myriads of long black boats covered with yellow awnings of woven pandanus leaves which are poled along the ancient man-made canals that run for many miles through the coconut groves to the backwaters and the sea.

Kerala's trade, at least in terms of commodities, always tended to be a one-way traffic; even in the days of the Greeks the principal imports were luxury items for the use of the small ruling class, and the ancient Chera kings and their merchants demanded mostly solid Roman coin in exchange for their goods, so that in the 1st century A.D. Pliny complained of the impending ruin of Rome through the drain of currency to India in order to satisfy the Roman demand for luxuries. The pattern established two thousand years ago continues; Kerala is still one of India's principal exporting and cash-earning regions. Only one Indian in twenty-five lives in the state, but its people earn approximately an eighth of India's precious supply of foreign exchange by selling the products of plantations, coconut groves and of the little peasant holdings where pepper and ginger are grown. This makes all the more ironical the fact that another of Kerala's claims to distinction is that the average income of its people is well below the level for India as a whole.

A negative result of Kerala's traditional emphasis on crops for foreign trade is the fact that for centuries it has suffered from shortage of rice, the favourite food of the Malayalis. Food crises are nothing new on the Malabar Coast. As long ago as the 16th century the Zamorin of Calicut was importing rice to feed his people, and on one occasion when the Portuguese destroyed a flotilla of his grain ships a minor famine was only narrowly averted. Then, as now, the Malayali farmers were already concentrating on growing spices for the foreign market rather than food for themselves.

Of Kerala it would be wrong to say that trade followed the flag: there is no evidence that before the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498, as the representative of a king seeking lands to

annex and convert, any of the traders who came by sea from the West or from China sought either to gain political control of the region or to establish fortified posts. But if trade did not follow the flag, religion always followed trade. The Romans started the process with the Temple to Augustus which they built at the ancient port of Muziris (now Cranganore—near Cochin) in the 1st century A.D. The Christians and the Jews followed quickly afterwards: both claim that their first representatives arrived at Muziris, in the 1st century A.D.; as I shall show, there is good evidence that both communities came—at the latest—by the early 2nd century A.D., and that it was Greek sailing boats which brought them.

The Moslems of Kerala form two distinct groups: the descendants of the Arab merchants who have been trading along the Malabar Coast since before the beginning of recorded history, and the Malayalis who were converted either forcibly during the invasions of Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan in the late 18th century, or voluntarily because they wished to escape from the social disabilities of belonging to low Hindu castes. The descendants of the Arabs claim that they brought Islam to Kerala before the end of the 7th century, and that their religion made its way peacefully along the Malabar Coast long before the Afghans propagated it by sword in northern India. The Moslems have remained strongest in Malabar, the northern part of Kerala; around Calicut they comprise almost half the population.

The Christian strongholds, on the other hand, are in the former princely states. In Cochin 43 per cent of the population are Christians; around Kottayam in Travancore, which is the Rome of the Syrian Christians and the seat of their leader, the Catholicos of the East, they actually outnumber the Hindus. The Christian strength represents a series of conversions corresponding to various phases of trading activity. The Syrian Orthodox Church, which—with its various schisms—forms the largest and most interesting group of Christians in Kerala, dates from the era of Alexandrian trade and claims to have been reinforced by waves of immigrants who came from Mesopotamia and Persia

under the leadership of Christian merchants. The Roman Catholics arrived under the aegis of the Portuguese state-controlled trading enterprise, with its centre at Fort Cochin; apart from an attempt to take over the Syrian Church, this era was marked by the spectacular mission of Francis Xavier among the low-caste fishermen of Travancore which laid the foundations of a flourishing Latin Catholic Church. Finally, after the East India Company established its dominance, the Protestants of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Travancore and the Lutherans of the Basel Mission began work in Malabar. A far-reaching reformation within the Syrian Church emerged from the work of the Church Missionary Society, which also laid the foundations for the Anglican-dominated Church of South India.

The Jews made few converts, though there were enough to establish a class of Black Jews, sharply distinguished from the White Jews, descendants of immigrants from Spain and Mesopotamia. The Christians and Moslems, on the other hand, worked to such effect that today 40 per cent of the people of Kerala follow one or other of the Middle Eastern creeds. Adherents of both religions have received a social recognition on the Malabar Coast unparalleled in the rest of India; not merely do they live in a society which, given its conservatism, is surprisingly hospitable to deviant creeds, but some groups of them have even maintained a high standing in relation to the caste system. Except for the Jews, a small dwindling community reduced by emigration to Israel, the adherents of the non-Hindu religions now form important political interest groups; no Keralan government has yet stayed in power without the support of either Christians or Moslems.

But the role of Christianity in shaping the special character of Kerala has gone far beyond its success in making converts. It was mainly by the efforts and influence of 19th-century Protestant Christians that modern, Western-style education was introduced into Kerala. In pre-British Kerala there did indeed exist a system of education not unlike that of ancient Greece, with Sanskrit academies for Brahmin boys, and kalaris or gymnasia where the youth of the Nair caste (including—as in Sparta—the

girls) were not only taught the military arts, but also received a general education which—rudimentary though it may have been—imbued them with a feeling that learning was valuable and made them willing students in the first English schools. It is largely owing to the efforts of Victorian missionaries that Kerala has a literacy rate twice that of India as a whole, and a passion for education which seems unbounded.

Two sights impressed me whenever we set out on a morning journey in Kerala, and increased my sense of the state's uniqueness in India. We would drive past great columns of children crowding the roads on their way to school, dressed with that almost fanatical cleanliness which characterizes the Malayalis—the boys in shirts and shorts, and the girls in long blue skirts with flowers in their hair, all barefooted, and all carrying books and slates under their arms; I had seen nothing like it anywhere else in Asia south of Japan. Nor had I seen anything at all like the bleak little teashops of Keralan villages in the early morning, crowded with coolies scanning the newspapers or listening while others read them aloud. More than 40 newspapers in the Malayalam language are published daily in Kerala; they are read and discussed by people of all classes and castes. Here again the missionaries deserve much of the credit; in 1821 the Anglicans in Kottayam set up the first printing press on the Malabar Coast, and in 1846 a German missionary started the first Malayalam newspaper.

Poverty and literacy form an explosive mixture, and one of the main ingredients in Kerala's present political instability is the fact that Western education has created expectations which the present economic system in this tightly overcrowded region cannot possibly fulfil. Kerala—and this is another way in which it is unique, not merely in India but also in the world—is the only state in which a Communist government has gained power through a fairly conducted democratic election; it happened in 1957. There are special circumstances attending the Communist rise to power in this region—not least the magnetic personality and the long record as a militant in the struggle for Indian independence of the Left Communist leader, E. M. S. Namboodi-

ripad; at the same time there is no doubt that the intellectual stimulation provided by education and the habit of reading has combined with the frustrating sense of being trapped inescapably in poverty to produce a rebel mentality that seeks its outlet always in radical solutions. 'Left, left, more left, that is the Kerala way,' as one of the local Congress leaders admitted sadly.

This does not mean that all Keralans—or even all those who vote for the Party—are Communists. Rather, they are enemies of established order, and even a Communist order is not exempt from their hostility. As soon as they had put the Communist government into power in 1957, the Malayalis united against it in the so-called Liberation Movement, and in 1959 overthrew it in an extraordinary campaign of civil disobedience. Yet in the election that followed they gave the party a bigger popular vote than ever before. To vote Communist, in the context of Keralan politics, is, for most of the people who do so, a way of making a radical protest against an existence lived always on the edge of hunger in a world where others prosper. But even Keralans who are not poor have a share of this restlessness which makes all governments unstable and which induces in all men a delight at the thought of being king-makers and king-breakers. Perhaps Nehru went too far in describing the Malayalis as intellectual anarchists, but emotional anarchists they certainly are, as emphatically as the Spaniards, with all the anarchist's strange mixture of conservatism and rebellion, with all his double yearnings for the golden age of the past and the libertarian paradise of the future, with all his flaming discontent with what is present. Like the anarchists, they have a strong feeling for local and communal loyalties, but, also like them, they can be inspired by universal visions. India as a whole may have produced its Gandhi, but Keralans are inclined to take more pride in their own great spiritual-social leader, Gandhi's contemporary, the low-caste sage Sri Narayana Guru, with his tireless preaching of the doctrine, 'One Caste, One Religion, One God'.

Sri Narayana Guru preached a moral and religious universalism. What the newspaper-reading labourers of Kerala see in Communism is something rather similar—a doctrine of political

universalism—and their faith has a naïve and furious generosity which is quite different from the attitude of the Communist intellectuals who, in Kerala as elsewhere in Asia, are fully alive to the dangers and flaws of the movement they support, but are convinced that there is no force in India which can in the long run stand as a viable alternative to Communism.

Communism, the most recent and most dangerous of the gifts to emerge from the Pandora's box bequeathed to Kerala by Western educators, has given that state a double interest to anyone who studies the proto-politics of contemporary Asia. The fact that the Keralans have been the first to elect a Communist government of their own democratic free will and may do so again, is important not only as an aspect of Kerala's uniqueness among Indian states. Part of that uniqueness, after all, consists in being first, and what has happened on the Malabar Coast may give us a hint of the future that awaits other under-developed regions in Asia. Kerala has had a long educational start, and has reached early the critical stage where almost universal literacy meets almost universal destitution. Fifty per cent of the working population in Kerala is either unemployed or critically underemployed: 95 per cent of Keralan children are attending school. Combinations of this kind are coming about in other have-not regions of the world; a consideration of the various political and social circumstances which attended the rise of Communism in Kerala has its uses in assessing the kind of developments we may expect throughout Asia during the next decade.

So, at the end of a complex history conditioned by external circumstances, Kerala has entered the modern world as a society which shows with almost textbook completeness the conditions likely to lead to one of those insoluble crises which modern Malthusians have been preaching in increasing tones of doom: a conservative social system combined with radical politics: a uniquely complex system of Hindu castes and non-Indian religions accumulated over the centuries and now breaking down into a constricting pattern of political pressure groups: an agricultural system developed in a past era of mercantile economics and producing for export rather than internal consumption: a

population that has tripled in numbers and density during the present century, confined within a tight little state where there is too little land, too little chance of employment and, consequently, too little food: finally, an educational system which creates expectations that in present circumstances can never be fulfilled.

This is the picture of Kerala seen through the eyes of pessimistic realism, and it is one aspect of the truth. But it is not the whole truth. For, like all dramas, that of Kerala presents not only a situation, which we have to work out in this case according to the laws of economics and sociology. It also provides a setting, and within that setting people who work out the drama and on whom the ending depends. As every traveller knows, no statement of the vital statistics of a country, no academic discussion of its problems, can prepare him for what he will actually find when he gets there, when he perceives through his five senses the nature of the place, and learns day by day, through fact and feeling intertwined, how the people have adjusted themselves to living there. Poverty can be accompanied by a great deal of happiness or by the most bitter dejection, for there are many circumstances, personal and social, which are as important in determining a man's outlook as material prosperity or its opposite. Even discontent, which the Keralans have in abundance, indicates a keener appreciation of what life a man possesses than mere resignation, and I found among Malayalis—in spite of their grievances—a devotion to their beautiful little land as intense as that of the Spaniard for his *patria chica*. From the dry, level landscape and the extremes of heat and cold which they experience in Delhi, Keralans return with relief and pleasure to the lush green landscape and the unvarying humid warmth of their own countryside. Eighty-five per cent of Malayalis are still villagers, and even those who live in the towns like to feel that they have kept an acre or two among their native coconut groves to which they can some day return. 'We are all absentee landlords, or would like to be,' said one student to me in Trivandrum. And the love of the country goes with an almost mystical faith in its destiny. Educated Malayalis are too

intelligent and too knowledgeable to ignore the problems of Kerala: in fact they enjoy nothing more than talking about them. Yet even the most extreme of conversational cynics never, in my hearing, was inclined to write off the future of Kerala as hopeless.

As I went about the state, daily learning more facts that convinced me of the gravity of its economic predicament, I found myself understanding their attitude. The very richness of the landscape reminded one constantly of its unused potentialities; the frustrated vitality of its inhabitants gave a shading of unreality to the picture of unavoidable catastrophe which facts and figures could so glibly evoke. I suspect that in Kerala, as elsewhere in the undeveloped countries, the solution of difficulties that now appear insuperable is largely a matter of rearranging what is already there; the basic ingredients of the future are still the land, the people and, above all, the history that has shaped them.

2

The Land of Kerala

LAND must always have been precious in Kerala, even when the problem was mainly one of wresting it from the primeval jungle, for the most important myths of the Malayalis are concerned with losing and gaining it. The good king Mahabali lost his land and Vishnu gained it in the myth which explains the festival of Onam, but Vishnu in his turn was a loser of land in the creation myth of the Nambudiri Brahmins, traditionally the highest of all the many castes of Kerala. After playing his trick, as the dwarf Vamana, on the unfortunate Mahabali and winning his kingdom from him, Vishnu was incarnated, for the sixth time, as the son of the Brahmin sage Jamadagni. He took the name of Parusurama, or Rama with the Axe.

When Vishnu returned to earth in this guise a wicked king of the Kshatriya caste, named Kartavirya, was reigning. Kartavirya robbed Jamadagni, and Parusurama, wielding his axe, immediately killed the culprit. According to the traditions of the blood feud, his earthly father Jamadagni was now murdered by the sons of Kartavirya. In revenge, the invincible Parusurama proceeded to slaughter all the males of the Kshatriya caste. He massacred these constantly resurrected enemies twenty-one times, until he had wiped them from the earth. Doubtless this is a mythical explanation of the fact that the chiefly caste of the Aryan invaders appears to have been almost exterminated in the series of civil wars condensed into the story of the great slaughter at the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*; later Kshatriyas, such as the Rajputs, seem to have been elevated from the ranks of invading warrior races like the Sakas and the Huns, who gradually lost their identity in Hindu society. But for Keralans the important part of the story of Parusurama is a kind of pen-

dant added later by the local Nambudiri Brahmins. According to the *Keralamahatmyam*, a Brahmin text which reached its final form as late as the 18th century, Parusurama underwent a great penance for having destroyed the Kshatriyas, as part of which, on the advice of the sage Visyamitra, he gave all India to the Brahmins, who immediately and rather ungratefully expelled him. He retired to the summits of the Western Ghats, then the ultimate edge of the land, and called on his fellow gods for help. Subramaniam, the peacock-riding son of Siva, who under the name of Murugan has always been a favourite deity in Kerala, interceded on Parusurama's behalf with Varuna, the God of the Sea, who agreed to give the exiled hero all the land he could cover with a throw of his axe from the mountains where he stood. Parusurama made his cast, the axe landed near Cape Comorin, and the whole strip of land which is now Kerala rose at once from the sea. Presumably to show his total humility, Parusurama then settled on the new land some sixty-four families or clans of Brahmins of the Nambudiri sub-caste, who had remained faithful to the pure teachings of the Rig Veda, and, on his eventual departure, gave them sovereign rights.

The story as it stands is the adaptation of an ancient creation myth to suit the purposes of the Brahmins who, by the 18th century, were struggling hard to retain the dominant social position they had established in Kerala during the Middle Ages. But on one point—that of the recent emergence of Kerala—it agrees with the view of geologists, who maintain that the foothills of the Ghats and the flat coastal land of the Malabar Coast are young in terms of the world's age; they were thrust up from the seabed by volcanic action long after the great land mass of India was formed. Even in historical times, the wearing down of the mountains has produced much new land in Kerala. Inland towns, like Kottayam and Tripunithura, the old capital of the rajas of Cochin, were seaports in the days when the Greeks sailed the Arabian Sea. The wide stretches of low-lying country which now separate these places from the ocean were formed by the peculiar action of the currents off the Malabar Coast, which

sweep the sand and silt flowing down the rivers into long banks parallel with the shore; eventually the banks rise above the water level, and trap the rivers into wide, sluggish channels known as backwaters, and into great lochs like the Vembanad Lake of Cochin, more than 80 square miles in extent, and the Ashtamudi Lake at Quilon, which fill with fresh water in the monsoon season but are brackish at any other time because of the intrusion of the tides; these beautiful island-studded and almost landlocked inlets form excellent harbours. The result of this process is a coastline that constantly changes. A dramatic instance of such change was the series of great floods which, in the 1340's, swept down the Periyar, the largest river of Kerala and silted up the harbour of Cranganore, the old Muziris; the waters had to find a new outlet, and broke open the channel around the Island of Vypeen which is now the seaward entrance to Vembanad Lake, so that by the time the Portuguese appeared at the end of the 15th century Cranganore had already declined into a minor trading centre, with all its ancient glories forgotten, and Cochin was about to take its place as the chief port of the Malabar Coast; even today Cochin is the second port, next only to Bombay, in Western India.

The great sweeps of sea-linked lakes and long placid reaches of backwaters, bordered by low stretches of sandy land fertile with coconut groves, create the peculiar beauty of the Kerala coast. They remind one of the tortuous palm-bordered channels of the Indonesian archipelago where Conrad's captains sailed; they seem East Indian rather than Indian. Parusurama's country is not merely geologically more recent than the rest of India; even in appearance and atmosphere it seems to belong to a younger creation, richer, less exhausted, and far more abundant and varied in its beauty than any other region south of the Himalayas.

Until recently the mountain roads through the Western Ghats and the railway through the wide trench of the Palghat Gap, running west from Coimbatore, were the usual routes for travellers coming to Kerala from other parts of India, though Europeans and Arabs usually arrived, as they had done for cen-

turies, by the sea routes to Cochin and Calicut. Journeys took time and endurance, and there were comparatively few casual visitors. Most foreigners came to work as missionaries, teachers, merchants, and often to end their lives early from cholera or one of the other fatal tropical diseases which have now almost vanished from the Malabar Coast. Sailors stayed between monsoons, until the steamboats began to appear in the later 19th century. But real tourists were rare even a generation ago; as old Malayalis tell one, a foreign face was not often seen outside a few port towns like Fort Cochin, Calicut and Alleppey, the centre of the coir trade.

The one direction by which travellers almost never came was southward over land from Bombay or Goa, and even now there is no direct way of communication on earth level along the inhospitable Konkan Coast, celebrated among ancient voyagers as a haunt of pirates; even invaders rarely chose that direction. Yet today it is over this very region that the planes fly daily from Bombay to Trivandrum, and such a journey gives the most dramatic first view of Kerala. If one goes in winter, the best time climatically, the sky is clear and bright, and to the east the hazy blue Ghats rise unclouded out of their mantling jungle, terminating in grass-covered blunt summits like the backs of gigantic animals. On the laterite slopes of softly folding foothills rust-red gashes of cultivation break through the green of the plantations, and rice paddies wind like continuous jade-coloured rivers between the wooded promontories that project from the hills into the plain.

The plane follows the coastline and immediately below one stretch beaches of fine sand: in the north, from Cannanore to Calicut, bitten into bays by outcropping capes, then broadening into smooth yellow shores, shaded by leaning palms, which turn silvery white at Alleppey, and black along the radio-active beaches of ilmenite at Quilon, and then gold again as one nears Trivandrum. The surf is a white, constantly moving line, above which are laid out the curious patterns of drying nets and the narrow shapes of long black fishing canoes, while out on the water, and never too far from the shore, other boats—like tiny

water insects in the vertical distance—describe the wide circles in which their nets are laid to trap the inshore shoals.

It is only on the sea that one is really aware of human life, for over the low land, between the shore and the foothills, the coconut groves form areas of dense green cover that sometimes stretch for many miles in each direction, broken only by the canals running down to the backwaters and by the great white churches of the Syrian Christians which ride glittering like sugar cathedrals above the level of the foliage. The total impression is that of an almost suffocating natural abundance, as if one were flying over a lost Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve have hidden themselves from the observing eye.

On reaching the ground, one is immediately aware that if this is Eden, Adam and Eve have stayed and have multiplied beyond all moderation. Far from being vast uninhabited gardens, the coconut groves shelter thousands of small huts, often made entirely from the by-products of the palms themselves, the roofs and walls of great leaves woven into tweed-like patterns, and the pillars and ridge poles of the trunks. Sometimes the walls are made of packed mud; it is a sign of prosperity if they are built of blocks of local laterite stone, which cuts like bread when it is quarried but hardens on contact with the air into a bricklike solidity. But even the best of these houses in the coconut groves are usually minute in size, with unglazed window apertures, and often without chimneys; when cooking is done indoors during the rains, the smoke has to find its own devious way through the leaves of the roof.

Keralan villages bear little resemblance to the tight, squalid settlements of northern India, which huddle along a single street or in a knot of houses for mutual protection. Because of its geographical isolation, Kerala has rarely experienced invasions like those that have been a recurring feature of life in north India; even Tippu Sultan was halted on the borders of Travancore. Malayalis, among whom dacoits or bandits are unknown, fear neither strangers nor neighbours, and feel no need to cling together in close communities. Their villages are the most open in the world, with the possible exception of Malayan kampongs; the

dwellings are scattered wherever there are trees to give them shade, and with so little sense of the need to concentrate around a focal point that the stranger is at a loss to know where one community ends and the next begins in the broad ribbon of settlement that runs, broken only by a few stretches of stony wasteland, almost all the three hundred miles from Cannanore to Trivandrum.

In spite of their unorganized appearance, the Malayali villages have quite elaborate social structures. Each will have at least one school and a public library; it will have a public health service, trade union branches and political party groups, places of worship (often a temple, a church and a mosque) and always a few teashops which serve as gathering-places for the various communities. Many Malayali intellectuals and officials return to their native villages in middle age and take an active part in local activities, so that there is even a cultural sophistication about rural life in Kerala; in many respects it is almost urban. But the various institutions which represent the village's corporate life are usually so scattered that only the small knot of stores and teashops, with a trampled field as a market place for fish merchants and potters, serves as the centre around which the settlement unobtrusively clusters.

Thus the appearance of the countryside is shaped by the taste of the people. Every Malayali likes to live apart, even if, as most villagers do, he lives on someone else's land and cannot even pick the coconuts from the trees that give him shade. His tiny hut may be overcrowded ('Producing children is the chief cottage industry in Kerala,' said one weary public official), and he may be abysmally poor, but he has fresh air and sun, room to grow a yellow-flowered cucumber vine and a couple of banana trees, and the minimal privacy that his sense of dignity demands.

Because they cling to this kind of village existence, many country people in Kerala become habitual commuters, sometimes uncomplainingly travelling twenty miles to a job as peon or messenger in an office in one of the towns. At the most important factory of Alwaye, Kerala's major industrial centre, a large company town has been built, with comfortable cottages

and big gardens, but the General Manager complained to me that it was not easy to find occupants; most of his workers preferred to live in their much less convenient village huts, and each morning the company had to run a fleet of buses to collect them. Even the benevolent paternalism of modern industry has been defeated by the obstinate ruralism of the Malayali.

So well concealed in the subaqueous shade of the palm trees are the huts of most Malayali villages that it is hard to believe the statistics which show that in such coastal areas the rural population is often between two and three thousand people per square mile. At evening, as the villagers return from work, one is finally convinced. They fill the country roads like the crowds in Tokyo filling the streets at the hour when the offices close. In the peculiar luminosity which the soft air of the Malabar Coast takes on just before sunset, they make an extraordinary pattern of clear colour against the green and brown background of gardens and huts. The women wear blouses and wrapover skirts in bright primary colours—yellows and carmines and clear blues that accentuate the richness of their dark Dravidian colouring. The men are more conservative, keeping to the old Kerala tradition of wearing white, which was once universal for both sexes. Their main garment is the long cloth called mundu, which is tucked at the waist and reaches to the ankle, giving its wearer a peculiar mincing walk, unless, to stride more freely, he kilts it to the knees. Many men wear no garment above the waist, but those who belong to the higher castes at least drape a towel-like cloth over the shoulders, and if they consider themselves modern they wear shirts which, like the mundu, are always washed to a dazzling whiteness. This garb is worn by men of all religions and all classes, except for the small westernized minority who have gone over to bush shirt and cotton slacks; even the Maharaja of Travancore received us dressed in mundu and shirt. Poor Keralans live simply from necessity, but their wealthier compatriots make simplicity a cult, so that among Malayalis one rarely sees the ostentation which in northern India is almost regarded as a duty of the rich. The local mores set a value on eating frugally and doing without elaborate furniture; one may wear fine

rather than coarse cotton, but one does not wear silk. When the Communist Party in Kerala splintered two or three years ago, one of the most damning things said by the members of the Left about the leaders of the Right was that they had become 'men who wear nylon shirts'.

The simplicity of Keralan life tends to mask its poverty, for it goes with a sense of order. A Malayali house may be no more than a hut of sticks and dried leaves, raised on a clay stoop in the midst of a dirt-floored compound; but the house and the stoop and compound will be swept clean, every one of the family's scanty possessions will have its place, and there will be no rubbish festering for the flies; indeed, there will probably be no flies. More important, there will be a place for water to be poured from a brass pot over the guest's hands, and for the members of the family to bathe at morning and at night.

This traditional orderliness, which punctuates the Malayali's daily life with rituals of cleanliness, finds its parallel in the patterns that shape the Kerala landscape. The abundant verdure of a warm, damp, sheltered land at first fills one's mind with thoughts of nature's unaided bounty. Yet, outside the mountain jungles, a wildly natural scene is unusual in Kerala. In this much-used land, the average farm holding is little more than an acre in extent, and hardly a corner of soil goes untended. Almost every tree has been planted, for fruit or shade or timber. Even the palms which grow in such profusion beside the backwaters are not native to the country; they have always been cultivated for coir and copra. Except for the earth itself and the great waterways, coastal Kerala is a completely humanized landscape, and it is hardly less so as one goes into the hills, among the terraced paddies and the thick green columns of pepper growing on the trunks of jack trees, among the groves of spear-straight areca palms and the rubber plantations marching regimentally over the hills in linear perspectives. The only echo of the wilderness that exists outside the mountain jungle is to be found in those corners of temple yards called kavus, which are allowed to run wild in dense tangles of trees, bushes and creepers, and are sacred to the primeval and still respected serpent deities.

If the Kerala countryside is ordered and half urbanized, the towns and cities by a compensatory logic are half rural, and, surprisingly in such an overcrowded land, they are very loosely populated. There are only nine places in the whole state with a population of over fifty thousand, and even the largest, the capital city of Trivandrum, is a miniature metropolis of barely a quarter of a million inhabitants.

Without deliberately intending it, the people of Kerala have come very near to the ideal of the garden city, with houses and palaces, colleges and public buildings loosely arranged and masked by the abundance of trees which are never leafless and which blossom at varying seasons, so that there is always colour and fragrance. Trivandrum, built on a cluster of hills between which the breeze blows up from the sea three miles away, is one of the most visually pleasing towns in Asia, and one of the cleanest.

Like other Keralan towns it has no slums to compare with the overcrowded warrens of degraded squalor which the passing visitor to Calcutta often believes, as he goes on his hasty journey, are typical of the life of the poor in India. In Trivandrum even the poor live with space around them. The worst areas I saw in the city were the valley bottoms where the former untouchables had squatted on public land. The air in these hollows were more humid than that on the hillsides where the middle-class families lived, and the mosquitoes were more numerous, but the squatters still lived as transplanted villagers, in thatched huts each with its marginal fragment of land under the palm trees. These people were happy enough with the relaxed existence of their muggy valleys to reject a more comfortable but less private way of life. A few months before we reached Trivandrum the city council had tried to move them to blocks of workers' tenements which had been built especially to accommodate them. Every one of the supposed beneficiaries had refused obstinately to move; the Mayor of Trivandrum drew the appropriate conclusion when he wryly remarked to me: 'In Kerala every man likes enough land to give him room to swing his arms!'

There is a deceptive uniformity about the Keralan scene. The

1. Typical Kerala. A canal on the island of Vypeen

2. The backwaters near Cochin. The canoe men are fishing for prawns with circular throw nets

3. The edge of the jungle

4. Anjengo: the remains of the East India Company's fort

whole coastal plain exhibits the same cultivated landscape, the same combination of ribbon villages and half-rural towns, the same kind of domestic architecture; the same breed of people, dark, small, fine-boned, rarely beautiful in a classic sense, but often surprisingly attractive because of the charm that emerges from their particular combination of sharp intelligence and simplicity of outlook.

Yet as one goes from south to north the feel of the landscape does change; there is a sweetness to Travancore, an almost edible lushness, which is no longer there in Malabar, where the back-waters come to an end, the hot-coloured outcrops of red laterite push down towards the coast, and the light becomes perceptibly harsher. The white churches are replaced by ugly, shed-like mosques, without domes or minarets; the unveiled Moplah woman, in acknowledgement of Islamic codes of modesty, wear long-sleeved blouses and silver belts, and cover their abundant hair with brilliant kerchiefs; the towns become steadily more narrow and congested.

But the differences between coastal Malabar and coastal Travancore are slight compared with the differences between the ordered and cultivated lowlands and the long strips of jungle and high valleys on the slopes of the Ghats. The jungle is a tall, dense rain forest—umbrella-topped trees covered with epiphytic orchids and festooned with lianas which unite with the thick undergrowth of flowering bushes to create an almost impenetrable tangle; occasionally the forest opens into dark, humid glades where cardamom is grown, and in some places it gives way to vast and equally dense thickets of bamboo. Through this narrow three hundred miles of woodland Kerala's thirty tribes of aborigines are scattered in small, often temporary villages of bamboo huts thatched with grass, and the diminished herds of wild elephants still enjoy the freedom of a waning domain.

For the jungle is slowly shrinking. The planters have been in the hills for generations, carrying on an archaic survival of the life of the British sahibs, with their exclusive clubs and their white bungalows on hillsides covered with a densely textured carpet of dark-green tea bushes. In recent years the Malayalis

from the coast—mostly Syrian Christians—have been coming up the valleys to gnaw as hungry squatters at the edges of the jungle, burning the forests to grow their crops of hill rice and often stealing the rare and valuable rosewood trees, on a single trunk of which, exported to Italy through the Arab merchants of Beypore, a man can make 50,000 rupees—enough for a frugal Malayali to retire to his village for life. And now, as the last line of attack, the engineers are moving in, Indians, Canadians and Americans working together, to dam the precipitous gaps which the rivers cut millennia ago in the great ridges of the Ghats, and to turn whole forested valleys into artificial lakes. In the process they are changing the life of the wilderness, cutting roads into fastnesses which once were accessible only to aboriginal hunters, and in the heart of the jungle building modern villages for the the workers on hydroelectric projects.

Already, as the forests shrink, the rainfall in the Ghats is declining, season after season. New quick-growing forests of eucalyptus are being planted in an attempt to reverse the process, but even if they restore the rainfall, the character of the primeval jungle will be lost, and lost for ever; it takes centuries to grow a good rosewood tree. The need to gain new land, to exploit the resources of the rivers and woodlands, is likely in a generation to turn even the mountains of Kerala into man-shaped landscapes, with wild nature strictly confined to game reserves where the last bisons and tigers and the remnants of the elephant herds can survive on the edge of extinction.

For the present, however, Kerala is still a geographical paradox, combining the most densely populated lowlands of India with some of the wildest highlands south of the Himalayas, preserved by the fear which the Malayalis feel for the mountains, with their thin clear air, their shivering nights, and their hostile forests. In this upland region the very scarcity of intruders has helped to preserve the clues that delineate the remote beginnings of human life in Kerala.

3

The Peoples of Kerala

MAN came late to Kerala. The peoples of the Stone Ages avoided the forests which then covered the lowlands and which their primitive tools could not conquer. No relics from the Early Stone Age have been found in the whole state; the single Neolithic implement that seems authentic was discovered in the marginal district of the Palghat Gap on the borders of Madras. Man made his first mark on the region as an iron-age builder of megaliths; when he reached the Malabar Coast he was already well advanced on the path towards civilization.

The relics of the megalithic culture are scattered all along the Ghats from Wynad in the north down to the Trivandrum district in the south, and the areas in which they are discovered branch out laterally into the coastal regions. Many of the monuments, particularly in the higher ranges, resemble those of Brittany and Cornwall—lines of menhirs running through the tea estates, stone circles enclosing groups of grey dolmens on the high empty grasslands. But others take on less familiar forms, and seem to have developed in response to the workability of the laterite stone which prevails in the foothills and on the outcrops in the plains.

At the village of Ariyanur, between Trichur and the sea, I visited one of these sites, on a low ridge covered with areca groves and tapioca gardens. In the middle of a mango orchard there was a cleared area about a hundred feet square, on which stood five complete *topi-cals*, as the Malayalis call them, and the remnants of two others. The *topi-cals* each consisted of four pointed slabs sloping inwards so that together they assumed the form of a truncated cone, on top of which was balanced a large stone cut in the form of an umbrella. *Topi-cal* means 'mushroom

stone', and this gives a realistic impression of the appearance of these very curious monuments; they are about four feet high, and the cap stones from six to eight feet across. The stones at Ariyanur had been declared a protected monument by the Archaeological Survey of India, and the young farmer who was appointed their guardian told us of another monument 'a furlong' away (a good half-mile in fact when we set out to walk there). It was an artificial underground cave cut beneath the horizontal surface of the laterite; a square hole about eight feet deep, with steps starting about four feet down and leading to a low doorway which gave access to a small chamber with wide benches or couches cut from the rock on three sides, and a port-hole-like aperture in the roof which allowed one to look down into it. The whole monument seemed so neatly planned, and the carving so craftsmanly, that one immediately assumed its makers to have been people at a fair level of sophistication.

The megalithic men of Kerala hunted elephants, whose tusks have been found in their burial places, and cultivated grain, since they used grinding stones. They had iron swords and iron axes, which may have had a ritualistic significance as they did in other megalithic centres, but which also meant that the forests were more penetrable to them than they had been to their neolithic predecessors. Their burial urns were massive wheel-thrown pots, and these, like their beads of agate and lapis lazuli, were decorated with geometric etchings. But there was also a representational style of art; in 1963, on the Periyar River, a burial site was discovered which contained terracotta figurines. These figurines, which I was not able to locate, were described in the *Ernakulam District Gazetteer* as being of both sexes, 'those of the males having beards and those of the other sex in the worshipping posture'. Such images suggest that magical practices may already have been evolving into a primitive form of religion.

The coming of megalithic man to Kerala was part of the great eastward migration, lasting millennia, which took this culture far into the Pacific Islands, but the direction from which it reached the Malabar region has not yet been determined. Some archaeologists suggest that the megalith builders came by sea,

landed near Cape Comorin, and moved slowly northward. But the distribution of the monuments, largest and most massive in the Western Ghats, suggests a different line of penetration, down the mountain chain from the north, and then along the river beds to the coastal region, where the few hills and the laterite outcrops became the sites of settlements and burial grounds.

Along with the legends of Mahabali and Parusurama, there is a third great myth concerning the origins of Kerala and its people. Among the rishis or great sages of Hindu legend there is one, Agastya, who is associated peculiarly with South India, and whose story bears some resemblance to the Prometheus myth; he is said to have taught the Dravidian peoples the arts of civilization, and although he was not actually chained to the mountains, he is still—according to his legend—obliged to reside on the Agastyakudum, a peak near Trivandrum, to keep watch on the Vindhya Range to the north in case it should suddenly decide to grow taller and obstruct the courses of the sun and the moon.

Agastya's name appears to have been added to the list of great Hindu sages in post-Vedic times, after the Aryanization of South India; this suggests that he was originally a Dravidian or even pre-Dravidian deity or culture hero. The tribes of the Western Ghats, who are obviously the oldest surviving peoples of Kerala, regard Agastya as the leader who brought them from the north and who taught them how to clear the land and to live in the forests.

Of the megalith builders themselves, the tribespeople who speak of Agastya appear to know nothing; they refer to their monuments as 'monkey-stones', and associate them with the great simian army which Rama and Hanuman led through South India to the conquest of Ceylon described in the *Ramayana*. Yet, when one comes to consider who the megalith builders—the first men to begin the human conquest and ordering of Kerala—actually were, one immediately begins to speculate on the ancestry of the mountain tribes themselves and to consider whether the myth of Agastya leading them down from the north does not actually refer to the southward movement of the megalith builders.

There are 210,000 tribespeople in Kerala, divided into approximately thirty groups. All of them now speak dialects of Malayalam or Tamil and worship Hindu deities in addition to their own gods, about whom they are inclined to be secretive. Orthodox Hindus still regard the tribesmen as beings outside and below the caste structure, but the latter have often strong ideas about their own elevated ancestry, and the Kurichiyas of Wynad, hunters who slay tigers with bamboo bows and steel-tipped arrows, claim that by descent they are Kshatriyas, and therefore superior to most of the civilized people in the plains, whom they never allow to enter their houses or the temples of their tribal gods.

As far as one can judge from physical appearance, the tribes of Kerala derive from a mixture of racial strains. The most numerous group, the Paniyars of the Wynad jungle, who were reduced to a state approaching serfdom by the coffee planters of last century, have an Australoid look, often with strongly negroid features and frizzy hair; in other tribes the Mediterranean strain that is dominant among the Dravidians of the plains appears to be strong. But in either case it seems evident that the tribes are descended from some of the earliest waves of settlers who worked their way southward down the Indian peninsula. They themselves recognize that they have inhabited the Western Ghats for an immensely long period. 'We came five hundred years before the planters,' the headman of a Muduvan village in the Munnar Hills told me, and by this figure, which represented the limits of his powers of calculation, he meant a period beyond memory and beyond tradition. In one of the earliest surviving works of Keralan literature, the narrative poem *Shilappadikaram* (The Ankle Bracelet), composed by the Chera prince Ilango Adigal towards the end of the 2nd century A.D., there are accounts of the mountain tribes of the Western Ghats who came to greet the prince's brother King Shenguttuvan as he marched through their territory on a mythical journey to the Himalayas.

King Shenguttuvan is represented reaching the white sandbanks of the Periyar River, and resting beside the river which is

strewn with the petals of tropical flowers. As he rests, the hill people approach him, the women singing and dancing according to their custom, and the priests singing the praises of the god with the red lance. From the distance, mingling with the sound of his marching army, the king hears the singing of harvesters, the calls of men searching for the hives of wild bees, the imitative whistles of bird-catchers, the shouts of hunters driving wild elephants into traps. Among their people come the chiefs of the tribes, carrying their tribute for the king's court. Their gifts include rare forest products like ivory and sandalwood, cardamom and precious woods. They bring millet and coconuts, the fruits and flowers of the jungle, and young animals of all kinds, including tigers, lions and elephants.

To this day the tribal peoples of Kerala still worship the god with the red lance, Murugan, and follow all the activities described in this passage, from performing ancient and primitive dances to trapping wild elephants. Moreover, except that the lion is now extinct in South India, the list of products of the forests and of the farms in the burnt clearings remains appropriate; still, instead of rice, most of the tribal peoples eat millet and similar grains. This way of life was obviously old and established even when *Shilappadikaram* was written; with the conquest of the low lands by the Dravidian immigrants governed by the Chera kings, the Western Ghats had become a refuge for what was left of the old megalithic culture.

Even to this day archaic rites survive which seem to link the present with the megalithic past. 'Megalithism is still a living institution' among the primitive peoples of Kerala, wrote L. A. Krishna Iyer, a Keralan historian who lived near Palghat, where there are both modern tribes and ancient stone monuments. Throughout the hilly spine of South India one still encounters the worship of boulders and of roughly cut stone columns set up in the fields and given offerings of vermilion and flowers, while I had several conversations with Keralan tribesmen which seemed to indicate the survival of megalithic practices in connection with religious rites and funerals. A headman of the Paniyars told of a special god of their own. 'I do not remember

his name,' he remarked evasively, but he went on to say that this deity was worshipped at a sacred tree among a number of stones. A Muduvan told me that his people were buried on a hillside 'among big stones', and that coconuts, betel leaves and flowers were buried with them.

The megalith builders, then, were the first men in ancient Kerala, and it is evidently their descendants who form the oldest and most primitive segment of the population in the modern state. The time of their arrival is as difficult to determine as most dates in early Indian history. Sir Mortimer Wheeler established, on the basis of pottery sherds at sites in northern Mysore, that megaliths were still being erected in the mountains of South India no more than a generation before the Greek traders began to bring Roman money and Italian pottery to Arikamedu near Pondicherry after Octavian's conquest of Alexandria. On this basis, he suggested that the custom of building megaliths may not have reached India until early in the 2nd century B.C. It seems likely, however, that the life of the culture was in fact much longer, and that, as some Indian scholars have suggested, the first settlement took place in Kerala no later than the 8th century B.C.

Later in the last millennium B.C. there must have been a long period of strife between the megalith builders and the Dravidians who replaced them in the lowlands. Eventually the older peoples were driven into the hills and were forced to accept the suzerainty of the kings in the plains. *Shilappadikaram* even provides an approximate and probably reliable date for this pacification; the tribal chieftains whom King Shenguttuvan meets on his march through the mountains address him with the words, 'For six generations we have been your vassals. May your glory live for ever.' Since Shenguttuvan was living when *Shilappadikaram* was written about 170 A.D., we can count six generations back from that date, which leads us to the end of the 1st century B.C., a time agreeing with Sir Mortimer Wheeler's estimate of the age of the last dolmens in the Mysore hills. It seems probable that the building of stone monuments, at least on any large scale

requiring considerable co-operative labour, came to an end with the defeat of the megalithic peoples, possibly by a concerted campaign on the part of the three great Dravidian kingdoms of the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. Urn burial, however, survived for some time, since there are references to it in a group of Tamil poems about Kerala called *Paditrupattu*, which almost certainly was not written until some time after the subjugation of the megalith builders.

The Chera kings and their conquests lead into the political history of ancient Kerala, a subject which belongs to the next chapter. Here I am concerned with peoples rather than kingdoms, and the next stage in the ethnic history of Kerala is the arrival of the Dravidians, generally regarded as the descendants of the dark Mediterranean people who once ruled all North India and who established the Indus Valley civilization, with its centres at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, round about 2500 B.C. A thousand years or more later the Indo-Aryans, with their Vedic religion and their modernized military tactics based on the war chariot, came riding over the Hindu Kush and destroyed the ancient cities of the Indus. By 1000 B.C. their dominion over the Punjab and the great plain of the Ganges and the Jumna was complete. Those of the Dravidians who did not remain to become serfs to the conquerors retreated east into Bengal, where eventually they lost their language but retained their physical characteristics, or south beyond the Vindhya mountains into the part of India which forms the modern states of Andhra, Mysore, Madras and Kerala.

The practice of building in stone, which the Greeks introduced to India, was not acquired by the Dravidians until relatively late in the Christian era, and in consequence there is no solid archaeological evidence by which to date their arrival in Kerala. One can, however, gain many hints of the ethnic history of Indian regions by observing the caste systems which prevail in them. In Kerala the caste system has some interesting and very suggestive peculiarities. I will begin by describing it briefly.

During the medieval era, at a period generally thought to lie between the 8th and 11th centuries, the Nambudiri caste of

Brahmins established cultural dominance in Kerala, and froze the pattern of communities into an extremely rigid and complicated form. There were no less than five hundred castes and sub-castes, divided from each other by rigorous rules against intermarriage and by an extraordinary pattern of pollution taboos. These minor divisions do, however, fall into nine principal groups, which range downward in the following order: 1. Brahmins, the priestly caste; 2. Kshatriyas, the rulers; 3. Ambalavasis, the temple attendants and musicians; 4. Samantans, the local chieftains; 5. Nairs, the traditional warriors and feudal landholders, ranking locally as Sudras but performing the functions of Kshatriyas; 6. Kammalans, or artisans, a group of five craft castes; 7. Ezhavas or Tiyyas, originally the caste to whom the task of tapping toddy from palm trees was allotted, but later an agrarian tenant class; 8. the Mukkuvans and related fishermen castes; 9. the outcastes, a miscellaneous group of highly untouchable communities mostly dedicated to menial work. This last group hides under its rags some very interesting features, since all the castes it comprises still carry on magical and shamanistic practices. They include the astrologer caste of Kanisans or Pannikars, the Vanans or washermen who claim powers of exorcizing diseases, the Pulayas who claim spiritual familiarity with the ancient serpent deities, and the Paraiyas, who are feared as sorcerers. From the Pulayas and the Paraiyas were drawn the agrarian serfs of the lowlands; even below them were the miserable, unseeable Nayadis.

It is a fair rule in considering Indian castes from a historical point of view to assume that the lowest represent the oldest inhabitants of the country, and the highest the most recent comers; the middle castes usually raise the most complicated problems. This is certainly the case in Kerala. The claim laid by the Nambudiri Brahmins in their Parusurama legend to have arrived first is not even worth examining; they are physically a different type from other Malayalis, fairer-skinned, taller, narrower of head, and it is obvious that they entered Kerala on the wave of Aryanization that swept South India some centuries after the coming of the Dravidians. Even at the time of their

ascendancy as the élite of Kerala, they were never more than a thin, insecure top crust on society, and it is doubtful if proportionately their numbers then were any higher than today, when the Brahmins of Kerala number in all about 300,000, or less than 2 per cent of the population.

The castes below them, Kshatriyas, Ambalavasis and Samantans, almost certainly did not arrive in Kerala as separate groups. The Ambalavasis, who seem to be mainly Dravidian by descent, probably represent a pre-Brahmin priesthood whose members were absorbed into the Hindu religious pattern, which allowed them to perform in the temples such functions as the Brahmins did not wish to take over; Ambalavasis were allowed to wear the sacred thread of the twice-born. The kingly families of Cochin and Travancore, which claim to be Kshatriyas, are descendants of the ancient Chera kings, and were originally Nairs, as were the Samantans, or local chieftains. The Kammalan artisan castes are traditionally bilingual, speaking Malayalam outside the house and Tamil within; they emigrated from the Tamil country east of the Ghats at a time when the two languages were already distinct, probably well within the Christian era. The three important groups that remain are the most numerous, and, in the present age of democratic politics, which has thrust the former ruling castes into the background, they dominate Keralan Hinduism by the weight of their numbers; they are the Nairs, the Ezhavas, and the outcaste groups, led numerically by the Pulayas and the Paraiyas. Altogether these three groups comprise over 80 per cent of the Hindu population in Kerala.

The Pulayas are the oldest inhabitants of the lowlands of Kerala. Many of their customs resemble those of the hill tribes, and their legends claim that they were once independent and lived under a Pulaya king who ruled from a fort at the village of Pulayanarkotta in the hills close to Trivandrum. A further suggestion of their past importance is contained in the legend that Sri Padmanabhan, the avatar of Vishnu who reigns in the great temple at Trivandrum, was discovered as an infant and nurtured by a Pulaya woman. There is a hint of past wars between Pulayas and other Malayalis in a curious Saturnalian custom called Pula-

peddi which was abolished by a proclamation of the Raja of Venad as late as 1696. Pulapeddi was the privilege accorded to Pulayas at a certain season to molest women of higher castes whom they encountered after nightfall, either by abducting them or by casting stones or sticks so that, if hit, the women would feel polluted and on their own accord would leave their homes and join the outcastes. At the same time, the shamanistic practices of the Pulayas and other outcaste groups link them with a pre-Aryan and even pre-Dravidian magical culture. There seems little doubt of their descent from those remnants of the megalithic people who stayed in the lowlands to be enslaved by the Dravidian invaders, while their relatives in the hills retained a much greater degree of independence.

It is the Nairs and the Ezhavas, the largest, most enterprising, and in recent times the most communally aggressive of the Kerala castes, who have aroused most speculation regarding their origins. 'The Nayars', K. M. Pannikar has justly remarked, 'were not a caste; they were a race.' Few historians are likely to reject this contention, for many customs and traditions distinguished the Nairs even from their fellow Malayalis. They had their own marital customs, their own forms of inheritance, their own art of warfare and their own war goddess, their own cult of ancestor worship, and their own highly original art form, the Kathakali dance drama. As a class of professional warriors who developed to a high level the art of swordsmanship, who formed themselves at time of battle into suicide squads, called *chavers*, and who despised manual work, leaving their lands to be tilled by tenants or—rarely—by hired hands, they bore a notable resemblance to the Samurai of Japan, but there is no evidence of an early link between Japan and Kerala, and the resemblance must be regarded as merely a striking example of parallel development.

The similarity of names and of certain customs has suggested that the Nairs may be linked either with the Nagas of Nagaland or with the Newars of Nepal, but it is much more likely that these groups derive their shared characteristics from the ancient Naga people whom the Aryans first encountered when they invaded North India. The people of this vanished North Indian

culture worshipped the Nagas, the serpent deities of the underworld, and they took their name from this cult; the Nairs today preserve the serpent cult.

One fact appears certain—not that the Nairs were the first people to settle in Kerala, but that by the time the Brahmins arrived towards the end of the first millennium B.C. they were the ruling race. The Chera kings, the first known rulers of Kerala, were by origin of Nair, not Kshatriya caste, as is clearly shown by their being classed in the Sanskrit epics as of degenerate race, outside the recognized caste system.

The Nairs are Dravidians. The fact that they show differences of temperament and custom from their Tamil and Mysorean neighbours of similar ancestry can doubtless be attributed to the different ways of life which the various groups have followed since the mountains divided them more than 2,000 years ago. Generally speaking, the Nairs are lighter in colouring than the Tamils and often they seem more akin in facial structure to North Indians; this may be due to their steady interbreeding with the Nambudiri Brahmins through the custom of *samband-ham*, a form of morganatic marriage peculiar to Kerala by which the younger sons of Brahmin families could form relationships with Nair women, the children remaining Nairs and thus introducing a new element into the race.

Apart from this special element of differentiation, which was operating for several centuries and only ceased a generation or so ago, there is no reason to suppose that the Dravidian culture was entirely homogeneous even in North India before the Aryans came. While the people of the Indus Valley seem to have been relatively passive agriculturists, as the mass of the Tamils later became, there may well have been other regional groups which developed more aggressive attitudes. Dark centuries of struggle with Aryan invaders before they reached South India could have produced the strong military dedication and discipline which the Nairs undoubtedly possessed. Such developments can be very rapid: one need only consider the historical instance of the transformation of the Sikhs within two generations from an almost pacifist sect into a holy military order.

In *Shilappadikaram* there is a description of a warrior tribe which may illuminate one of the transitional phases of Nair history. The hero and heroine of this verse romance, Kovalan and Kannaki, are wandering through the wilds of Tamilnad when they encounter a martial people whose members are called, for whatever the echo of names is worth, the Eiynars, and who live within a stockade of thorny hedges which protects the common granaries filled with looted grain. The Eiynars glorify death in battle, and worship a war goddess who manifests herself in one of the virgins of their tribe, represented as appearing with snakes in her hair, twined around the crescent-shaped tusk of a wild boar. She wears a skirt of leopard skin and a necklace of tigers' teeth, and carries in her hand a bow. In the temple to which the travellers are guided the war trumpets of the Eiynars are playing, and there the virgin Shalini takes the form of the consort of Siva in her most horrific form, with bloody lips and shining teeth, and to her are sung hymns of war and plunder.

The Nairs held the same belief in the glory of death in battle as the Eiynars, and the goddess who possesses the Eiynars' holy virgin is obviously closely related to Bhadrakali, the manifestation of Siva's consort who, as goddess of war, is the patron deity of the Nair caste and who possesses women and, even more often, men. The Nairs were originally a marauding warrior people of Dravidian origin, like the Eiynars of the *Shilappadikaram*, who moved over the Ghats, conquered Kerala and became softened by the land and its prosperity until they accepted at least some of the civilizing influence of the North Indian religions that found their way southward in the last centuries of the pre-Christian era; at the same time, when Prince Ilango Adigal wrote his great poem, their relatives, the Eiynars, were continuing to dedicate their military talents to robbery rather than ruling.

The Ezhavas, the most numerous of all the Hindu groups in Kerala, are also the most puzzling of its peoples. Subdued for centuries by the Brahmins and the Nairs, regarded as outside the fourfold structure of the caste system, they nevertheless retained a pride even in their position as the leading caste of the outcastes, and during the 19th century developed a great will to rise above

the limitations which society had laid upon them, a will personified most dynamically in the teachings of Sri Narayana Guru, who was himself an Ezhava. The Ezhavas sought education, even established their own schools, and were encouraged by the British who admitted them into the civil service in Malabar at the same time as they were kept out of the service of the native princes in Travancore and Cochin. Fortunate Ezhavas took to business and the Congress Party hierarchy; unfortunate ones to radical rebellion, for the poor Ezhavas have long formed the dedicated core of the Communist Party in Kerala. But whatever form the discontent of these people assumes, it shows an extraordinary spirit not in the least cowed by centuries of humiliation. Unwillingly, but inevitably, the higher castes granted the Ezhavas a place in the social sun, so that they have never, since independence, figured among the Scheduled Castes, which is the polite modern way of saying 'The Untouchables'. No group anywhere in India has so successfully, by its own efforts, removed from itself the double stigma of untouchability and ex-untouchability.

But the origin of the Ezhavas remains mysterious.

Our ancestors of old
Had their home in the land of Ceylon.

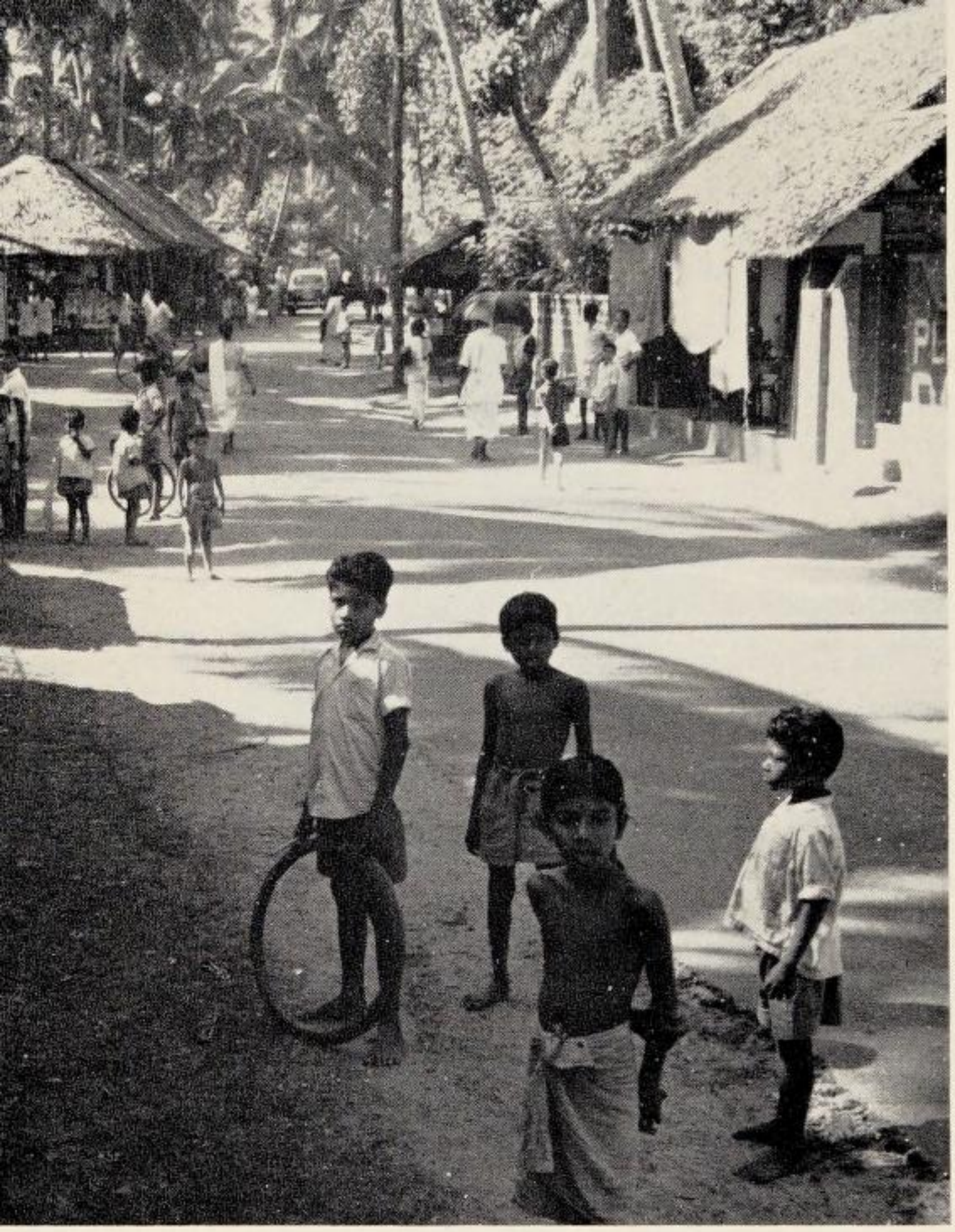
So runs one of their folk ballads, celebrating their 12th-century hero Aromal Chevakar. Other legends relate how they brought the coconut palm to Kerala. Botanists agree that the coconut is no native of Kerala and that it must have come from Indonesia, either directly or via Ceylon. And the fact that the occupation of tapping the palm for toddy is traditionally reserved for Ezhavas emphasizes the connection between the people and the tree. Still it is only Ezhavas who walk lithely up the palm trunks, with square-bladed knives and earthenware pots hanging from their waists, to cut the flower buds and gather the liquor that in eight hours will ferment into a heady and yeasty-flavoured beer.

There is certainly enough scattered evidence to tempt one to accept the tale of the Ezhavas arriving from the south-east, bringing the coconut with them, but the period of their arrival is almost impossible to assess. Since they were a socially humble

people who, unlike the warrior Nairs, did not contribute dramatically to history, they are rarely mentioned in contemporary records until the arrival of the Dutch in the 17th century. The fact that by this time they were evenly spread through the lowlands of Kerala from Cannanore in the north to Trivandrum in the south, suggests a long period of slow percolation, and the Keralan Communist leader, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, has actually claimed that there was in fact no separate immigration of the Ezhavas, but that they, the Nairs and the Nambudiri Brahmins belong to the same race and became divided as a result of the establishment of a caste system based on landholding. But to interpret Indian caste relationships according to orthodox Marxist doctrines, intended to describe 19th-century European societies, is only possible if one ignores a great deal that is peculiar to the history of India. And the evidence for a separate origin of the Ezhavas outside India, particularly in their own traditions, cannot be ignored. Some scholars, accepting the link between the Ezhavas and the importation of the coconut palm, have pointed to the fact that in the Greek sea-trader's guide, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, dating from the 1st century A.D., there is no mention of the coconut, but that it is mentioned by the traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes who visited India in the 6th century, and that therefore both coconut and Ezhavas must have arrived during the intervening time. This argument is not convincing; the coconut may have been introduced by the 1st century A.D., but may not yet have been important enough as an article of commerce to be worth mentioning in the *Periplus*. Certainly by the 2nd century A.D., according to the author of *Shilappadikaram*, it was already being cultivated by some of the mountain tribes.

Ezhava legends suggest that they first came as warriors; no other evidence confirms this, and in historical times their role has been completely unmilitary. Yet there may be some ironic truth in the tradition, for the Tamil poems of the 2nd and 3rd century tell of Ceylonese—as many as ten thousand at a time—having been brought to India as prisoners of the Dravidian kings round about the beginning of the Christian era and having been

5. Vijinjam, once the capital of the Ay dynasty and now a fishing village



6. The centre of a populous Keralan village. The houses are hidden in the palm groves

7. The canal at Fort Cochin

used as coolies; the subordinate position of the Ezhavas in the caste structure might well be explained by the fact of their being the descendants of liberated prisoners. Finally, there is the suggestion by Dr. P. C. Alexander in his *Buddhism in Kerala* that the Ezhavas are descended from the Buddhist community in Kerala, which—Dr. Alexander suggests—included both Ceylonese immigrants and Malayali converts. There are interesting aspects to this theory; the bringing of coconut palms strikes an echo of Ashoka's Buddhist policy of planting trees, particularly by the roadsides, for the benefit of the community, while there is some reason to believe that when Buddhism virtually disappeared in medieval India, at the time of the Brahminical revival, its adherents reverted to the status of low-caste Hindus. On the other hand, there is nothing in Ezhava traditions, with the possible exception of their Ceylonese ancestry, which seems to link them with Buddhism.

The Brahmins of Kerala, who vie with the Ezhavas for the title of having been the most recent immigrants, are not a homogeneous community; they are divided into several groups with different origins. The highest are the Nambudiris, who regard themselves as the purest race of Brahmins in India, the most faithful to the Vedic traditions. Below them are the Embrantini and the Pattar or Potti Brahmins; since these came, within historical times, from the Tuli region of Mysore and from Tamilnad respectively, their origins are well known. Except in a few border communities, the Nambudiris formerly controlled the temples and lived mainly on their revenues, while from necessity the alien Brahmins largely abandoned their priestly occupations, taking to trade and to service in the princely houses of Kerala; many of them were highly successful in these occupations. The poorer members of the alien Brahmin castes lived as wandering mendicants, fed by the Nambudiris in their temples or by the rajas in their palaces; at Padmanabhapuram Palace, formerly the seat of the Maharajas of Travancore, food was given daily to a thousand such Brahmins in a great dining-hall reserved for their use. By enabling their patrons to acquire merit, these holy beggars fulfilled a necessary function in a Hindu society.

Though the claim of the Nambudiri Brahmins to be descended from the sixty-four families of original inhabitants, who came to Kerala when the land was still steaming after being called from the sea by Parusurama, cannot be accepted, there is no historical record of their arrival, and all we can assume is that it was one of the incidents which took place during the gradual Aryanization of South India. That process involved first an introduction of Hindu religious concepts and deities and later the adoption of the Hindu social system; local Dravidian and even pre-Dravidian cults were not eliminated, but were merely integrated with the new religion, and their deities were regarded as manifestations of the great Hindu gods, particularly of Siva, Vishnu and Parvati in her various beneficent and maleficent forms. *Shilappadikaram* makes it clear that the process of religious integration had reached an advanced stage by the end of the 2nd century A.D., yet there is no suggestion of a temporal or even an exclusively spiritual domination by the Brahmins. The temples of local deities—even if they had been recognized as manifestations of Brahminical gods—appear to have been served by their own non-Brahminical priests, while, side by side with the Brahmins, Jain and Buddhist teachers had established themselves; even Prince Ilango Adigal, author of *Shilappadikaram*, became a Jain monk.

The hypothesis I would offer is that the Aryanization of the three Dravidian kingdoms of South India, those of the Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras, was in no way a process of military conquest; concentrated in the ultimate tip of India, the Dravidians had at last become powerful enough to resist any further military inroads on the part of the Indo-Aryans, who in their turn had become softened by a life in the plains of Hindustan. What happened among the Dravidians was the acceptance by a militarily powerful ruling class of a more highly developed and dynamic culture. There are many parallels in Asian history. One of them, well documented historically, was the cultural Sinification of Japan at the time of the Nara emperors in the 6th and 7th centuries A.D., a process which included the acceptance of Buddhism and Confucianism. Tibet was similarly transformed about

a century afterwards by the acceptance of both Indian and Chinese cultural influences, while it is virtually certain that the quasi-Indian civilizations which flourished in Cambodia, Malaya, Indonesia and other parts of South-East Asia were the results of similar conversions of native ruling classes to imported cultures; there is no evidence to support the idea of Indian military conquest or even large-scale Indian colonization in these regions, but to this day the vestiges of a medieval Hindu culture help to shape their ways of life.

This is what must have happened in Kerala and the other Dravidian kingdoms during the latter half of the 1st millennium B.C. The desirability of adopting many of the elements of an Aryan culture was recognized, and the Brahmins were welcomed as its emissaries, but no more strongly than the Buddhists and Jains, who represented important elements in that culture. One might narrow the probable period of the change (and hence more sharply time the arrival of the Nambudiri Brahmins) to within a single century—the 3rd century B.C.—when, under Ashoka, the North Indian culture of the Gangetic plain acquired a missionary impulse from a king whose avowed policy was one of conquering by peace rather than war. At the time of the 3rd Buddhist Council and afterwards, Ashoka sent his emissaries of the Dharma into Gandhara, Gujerat, and Ceylon, and far beyond the borders of India to the Hellenistic kingdoms of Alexander's successors. It seems most unlikely that he would have neglected the Dravidian kingdoms, and, with the princes of the south showing themselves willing to accept new religions, new ways of life, Jains and Brahmins followed the same path as the Buddhists. Indeed, with the emphasis on Buddhism which came about during Ashoka's reign, those Brahmins who held strongly to the Vedic doctrines would have a special reason to move away, and no Brahmins have been more dedicated in this respect than the Nambudiris.

One therefore pictures them abandoning their homes in northern India and moving in their joint families to Kerala, where the tolerant Chera chieftains (whose descendants were to give such warm welcomes to Christian and Jewish emigrants)

offered them land and helped them to set up temples. At this time, when a prince of the reigning dynasty chose to become a Jain monk, it is obvious that the Nambudiri Brahmins had no opportunity to assert their supremacy in any but a sacerdotal context. Indeed, Keralan historians are agreed that it was only between the 8th and the 11th centuries that the Nambudiri Brahmins sought and gained the extraordinary social ascendancy which they enjoyed throughout Kerala during the Middle Ages and retained in some areas of the state up to the end of the 19th century.

With the Nambudiri Brahmins, the pattern by which the principal peoples of Kerala came together is complete; the mountain tribes and the fishermen and serf classes of the lowlands emerge as the original inhabitants, descendants of megalithic immigrants; the Nairs represent the true Dravidian element, pressed southward during the early part of the 1st millennium B.C. by the spread of Aryan domination north of the Vindhya mountains; the Ezhavas appear as a seaborne people, probably from Ceylon, arriving with the richest gift Kerala has ever received, the coconut palm, at some time shortly before the beginning of the Christian era and not long after the time when the Nambudiri Brahmins wandered down from a Buddhist north where their Vedic conservatism was temporarily unwelcome.

When these four main groups had come together, the Malayali people was established. Its language was Malayalam; and Malayalam is also one of the ancient names of Kerala, a descriptive name meaning the land of sea and hills. Whether this language is a derivation of Tamil or springs directly from a common Dravidian stock is still being debated by linguists. Tamil was certainly the language of literature and of inscriptions in Kerala until the Middle Ages, but it may never have been more than a language of the court and of poets and scholars—unspoken by the people, as both Sanskrit and Persian were for long periods in North India. One fact, however, is certain: Malayalam has a greater Sanskrit content than any of the other Dravidian tongues, Tamil, Telugu or Canarese; this is due to the fact that the influence of the Nambudiris, treasurers of Sanskrit culture,

was becoming dominant at precisely the time—the 11th century onwards—when Malayalam first began to be used as a written language.

Later it was slight traces of foreign blood that were added to the Malayali stock. Only a tiny minority of the Moslems of Kerala are of Arab descent, and the small groups of Christians who came from Persia and Mesopotamia were so quickly absorbed that their modern co-religionists look very much like other Keralans; indeed, it is a sign of their predominantly native origin that they still preserve among themselves the division between high-caste Syrian Christians, claiming Nair and Nambudiri descent, and Latin Christians of the lowly fishermen castes, probably descended largely from the pre-Dravidians. The White Jews, who are often red-haired and fair-skinned, form the alien group which has remained racially most unassimilated, but they are now a miniscule community which can never have numbered more than a few thousand; the Black Jews are undistinguishable in appearance from other Malayalis. The Portuguese, who encouraged their soldiers to marry Malayali women, have left a faint racial heritage in the Cochin area, where names like D'Souza are still in use, but neither the British nor the Dutch intermarried extensively, and there are few recognizable Eurasians. The incursions of foreign influence which turned 40 per cent of Malayalis into Christians and Moslems were cultural in their effect, but not racial; they left the make up of the Malayali people as it was established by the beginning of the Christian era; since that time there have been no great migrations and hence no major changes.

PART II

BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY

4

The Age of the Cheras

THE political history of Kerala begins in the hints of poets and legend-makers. From these, with a few facts communicated by Greek, Roman and Chinese writers, one must reconstruct the long period from the beginning of the Chera kingdom, at some undetermined time before the birth of Christ, to the 9th century, when stone was first used in the construction of temple buildings and palm leaves began to be replaced by copper plates for making important records.

The Brahmins have their own tradition, embodied in a second 18th-century compilation, the *Keralolpatti*, of the beginnings of political organization on the Malabar Coast. Parusurama, having planted the sixty-four joint families of Brahmins as the seeds of Keralan villages, gave them laws and institutions to govern themselves. But, like modern Malayalis, the Brahmins found it impossible to agree, and their primeval republic declined into chaos. Parusurama, however, had been prudent enough to advise them, if they could not rule themselves, to invite kings from outside the country, and so began a line of monarchs called the Perumals.

According to the Brahmin account, the Perumals—who were Kshatriyas from over the mountains—were chosen for periods of twelve years each; in a narrative obviously fabricated to establish a primal Brahmin claim to the land of Kerala, this is the one feature that gains rather surprising confirmation from the accounts of the earlier European travellers, who tell not only of twelve-year kingships in the various principalities of Kerala, but also of an ancient festival called Mamankam which was connected with the winning of a kingship.

These accounts take us deep into the shadows of the sacred

wood, for they suggest the presence among the ancient Dravidian rulers in prehistoric Kerala of the institution of sacrificial kingship. The classic account is that in which the Portuguese mariner, Duarte Barbosa, tells the story he had heard of the twelve-year reign of the lord of Quilacare (a dependency of the kingdom of Quilon) and of the ritual suicide that brought his rule to an end.

> And in the province of Quilacare there is a gentile house of prayer in which there is an idol, which they hold of great account, and every twelve years they celebrate a great feast to it, whither the gentiles go as to a Jubilee. This temple possesses many lands and much revenue. It is a very great affair. This province has a king over it, who has no more than 12 years to reign from Jubilee to Jubilee. His manner of leaving is in this wise, that is to say: when the 12 years are completed, on the day of this feast, there assemble together innumerable people, and much money is spent in giving food to Brahmins. The king has a wooden scaffolding made, spread over with silken hangings: and on that day he goes to bathe at a tank with great ceremonies and sound of music, after which he comes to the idol and prays to it and mounts to the scaffolding, and there, before all the people, he takes some very sharp knives, and begins to cut off his nose, and then his ears and his lips, and all his members, and as much flesh off himself as he can, and he throws it away very hurriedly, until so much of his blood is spilled that he begins to faint, and then he cuts his throat himself. And he performs this sacrifice to the idol, and whoever desires to rule other 12 years and undertake this martyrdom for love of the idol, has to be present looking on at this: and from that place they raise him up as a king.

It is probable that already by the 16th century the real ruler of Quilacare did not die, and that only a proxy carried out this gruesome self-immolation, for in *The Golden Bough* Sir James Frazer quotes an account of certain princes of Malabar who delegated their powers in a part of their domain to a substitute who would accept on their behalf the ritual sacrifice.

> This institution was called *Thavettiparothiam* or authority obtained by decapitation. . . . It was an office tenable for five

years during which its bearer was invested with supreme despotic powers within his jurisdiction. On the expiry of five years the man's head was cut off and thrown up in the air amongst a large concourse of villagers, each of whom vied with the other in trying to catch it on its course down. He who succeeded was nominated to the post for the next five years.

Another aspect of the ritual sacrifice appeared in the feast of Mamankam which was last held in 1755 by the Zamorin of Calicut in the holy town of Tirunavayi in Malabar. As the festival was then carried out, the king offered himself for assassination by whoever dared attempt it; the successful assassin (there are no known instances of such success) would rule in his place. The ceremony was regarded as confirming the status of the Zamorin as the suzerain of all northern Kerala. It was said that he had usurped the right to hold the festival, and hence the right of suzerainty, from the Rajas of Valluvanad, and it was these rulers who always sent their chavers, or suicide fighters, to attempt the killing of the Zamorin. Captain Alexander Hamilton, who sailed the Malabar Coast in the later 17th century, described the Mamankam of 1695 in his *New Account of the East Indies.*

> A ceremony is followed by the Samorin, that a Jubilee is proclaimed throughout his dominions at the end of 12 years and the tent is pitched for him in a spacious plain, and a great feast is celebrated for ten or twelve days with mirth and jollity, guns firing night and day, so that, at the end of the feast any four of the guests who have a mind to gain a crown by a desperate action in fighting their way through 30 or 40 thousand of his guards, and kill the Samorin in his tent, he that kills succeeds to him in his empire. In Anno 1695 one of these jubilees happened when the tent was pitched near Ponnany, a seaport of his about 15 leagues to the southward of Calicut. There were but three men that would venture on that desperate action, who fell on with sword and target, among the guards, and after they had killed and wounded many, were themselves killed. One of the Desperadoes had a nephew of fifteen or sixteen years of age that kept close to his uncle in the

attack on the guard, and when he saw him fall, the youth got through the guards into the tent and made a stroke at His Majesty's head and had certainly despatched him, if a large brass lamp that was burning over his head, had not marred the blow; but before he could make another he was killed by the guards, and I believe the same Samorin reigns yet. I chanced to come that time along the coast and heard the guns for two or three nights and days successively.

All the accounts of the feast of Manakam present it as a festival of great antiquity, dating to the time before the Chera empire disintegrated in the early 12th century, and all indicate the former existence of a custom of sacrificial kingship, actually observed by early Dravidian rulers, but long transformed, by a series of evasions, into a ceremonial in which either a substitute victim suffered or the ruler presented himself for a combat which only by an extraordinary accident could end in his death.

After the Aryanization of Kerala, religious dedication was accepted as another kind of substitute for the physical sacrifice of the king on the termination of his customary period of office. At least two Chera kings renounced their temporal power and took up the life of the religious renunciate. One was the Vaishnavite devotional poet, Kulasekhara Alwar, who ruled Kerala in the 8th century and, on giving up his throne, wrote a stanza comparing his attitude with that of the worldly-wise who mocked his resolution:

They are but mad to me,
And I am mad to them.
Who benefits by such talk?
I call on you, Krishna, Ranganatha!
I am mad with longing for you.

A later renunciate king became the most famous ruler of Kerala because of an abdication for which Christians, Moslems and Hindus have all claimed the credit. He is known to history as Cheraman Perumal, and is said to have given up his throne in 825 and to have gone on a pilgrimage from which he did not return; his destination, according to the traditions of the various religions, was Mecca, or the shrine of St. Thomas at Mylapore

near Madras, or the Brahminical temple of Chidambaram on the Coast of Coromandel. But 'Cheraman Perumal' appears to have been, not a personal name, but a title held by the kings of the whole Chera dynasty, lasting from before the Christian era long into the 12th century, and it is possible that all members of the line, after reigning a set number of years, performed such an act of renunciation. Until the 16th century, when the Portuguese stopped it, a similar custom survived among the Rajas of Cochin, who claimed descent from the Cheras. It was always the second male member of the royal family, counting by matrilineal succession, who reigned, his predecessor having withdrawn into seclusion with the title of Perumpatappu Muppil; when the Muppil died, the reigning raja would take his place in seclusion, and the next prince would assume the responsibilities of state.

It is as a kingship already relieved of the burden of physical self-immolation, but limited in other respects, that the Chera monarchy makes its first appearance, not in any historical chronicle, for none has survived, but in the early Tamil poems of the Sangham epoch. The Sangham epoch was named after the Academies or Sanghams which are said to have flourished for the cultivation of the poetic arts in various ancient capitals of the Pandyan kingdom. Tradition claims three Sanghams, lasting altogether a period of ten thousand years; the first two existed in cities long submerged under the sea, the third in the still surviving city of Madurai. Except for a grammatical treatise on Tamil, all the surviving Sangham works are attributed to the Third Academy, and we can assume that this was the only institution of its kind which actually existed under Pandyan patronage. Since all their works appear to derive from a culture already partly Aryanized, the activities of the Sangham poets evidently represent a brief but rich flowering during the first three centuries of the Christian era. Of the three works of the epoch written by Keralan poets, the already quoted *Shilappadikaram* is the most important. The other two are the *Patridupattu* and the *Kalavali-harpathu*, a poem on the wars between the Cheras and the Cholas.

Shilappadikaram is the Sangham poem which presents the most complete picture of the political organization of ancient Kerala. King Shenguttuvan appears in it as a divinity, or at least an avatar, like the Hindu kings of Cambodia; the tribal women of the Ghats sing of 'the Chera, king of kings', as 'Vishnu himself, who shakes his mountainlike shoulders while he churns the sea'. Yet, incarnation of the god though he may be, the king's acts are bound by a strict code of duty. The Pandyan king of Madurai, having caused the execution of Kovalan, the hero of *Shilappadikaram*, on the basis of false information, declares, 'For the first time I have failed in my duty as protector of the southern kingdom. No way is left open to me save to give up my life.' And he dies immediately, as if by an act of the will. The philosophies of both Buddhism and Jainism irradiated the concepts of kingship current in Kerala at this time, and it is after the Buddhist poet Shattan has pointed the political moral of the Pandyan king's error that the Chera Shenguttuvan remarks: 'Injustice breeds fear among men. The power of a king is not to be envied.'

How authority devolved from the Chera king, theoretically all-powerful, is suggested in the references in *Shilappadikaram* to the 'king's council' and the 'five assemblies'. The king's council consisted of the inner group of respected elders and of powerful noblemen, rajas of districts like the 'ruler of Alumbil', who on one occasion makes a speech full of wise advice; the council was not merely the highest advisory body, but also the final judicial tribunal which assisted the king when he held his daily durbar to consider petitions and render judgements.

The role of the 'five assemblies' in the ancient Chera kingdom is not clearly defined, but it is likely that they were territorially organized. There were four divisions of the Chera kingdom proper, the northernmost beginning in the neighbourhood of Cannanore and the southernmost near Trivandrum. Trivandrum itself was part of the realm of the mysterious Ay kings who ruled up to the 10th century A.D. in the region later known as South Travancore, between Trivandrum and Cape Comorin, with their capital at Vijinjam, once a flourishing port but today

a dejected fishing village. During the Sangham era the Ay kings, later independent, seem to have been tributary to the Cheras, so that there would in practice be five divisions to the empire, and five assemblies, who were presumably elected by the Nair warriors, since they are mentioned in connection with the army.

Apart from these collective bodies which influenced royal policy and rendered legal judgements, the ancient Chera state had an elaborate executive structure. The chief minister appears to have functioned in the same comprehensive way as the powerful dewans who until twenty years ago administered the states of Travancore and Cochin on behalf of the native princes. The chief priest, who probably served the Nair war goddess, and the chief astrologer both wielded great influence in the determination of policy and also in the timing of wars. The king was commander of his army, and often, mounted on his state elephant, shaded by the imperial white parasol and preceded by the royal sword, would lead his men into battle; his defeat in combat was usually the signal for mass surrender. The commanders who served under him were hardly less important than ministers; on the eve of battle they feasted with the king, garlanded with fig-leaves.

Equally indispensable to the operation of the Chera kingdom were the scribes who kept the records in the capital of Vanchi, the city lying close to the great port of Muziris, and appended to royal decrees the king's seal of baked clay. There were also numerous tax collectors who levied the dues on both land and commerce. The system of land tenure that obtained under the early Cheras is not definitely known, but it is likely that the cultivators held their farms in fee, and paid a kind of royal tithe, rendered in kind, on their crops.

But the great trade from the ports of the Malabar Coast with Alexandria and the West was probably the main economic resource of the Chera kings, and even at this early period the pattern of agriculture in Kerala was being shaped to meet the demands of commerce. Indirectly, through traders coming down the coast of India from Gujerat and even from the Persian Gulf, the products of Kerala had found their way in very ancient times

to Arabia, and thence they were transported either up the Red Sea to Alexandria or along the Euphrates valley into Mesopotamia. Teak from Kerala was found in buildings erected during the Babylonian era, round about 600 B.C., at Ur of the Chaldees, and this is much more solid evidence of early trade between the Malabar Coast and the Middle East than the unsupported theories of Phoenician penetration. In the early period the Malayalis themselves took an active part in the foreign trade, and many of the merchants whom the Alexandrian shipmasters encountered in Arabian ports during Ptolemaic times were Indian.

It was about the middle of the 1st century B.C. that a revolution in navigation started the direct trade between Kerala and Alexandria. The Greek mariner Hippalus discovered the pattern of the monsoon winds and found that by putting out at the right season from Ras Fartuk, one of the promontories in southern Arabia, he could sail straight over the Arabian sea and in forty days reach the Indian coast. Hippalus made his first landfall at the Indus delta, but very soon mariners were sailing on winds that took them directly from Aden to the Malabar Coast. This traffic began before the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and since the rulers of both Egypt and Kerala were actively interested in the trade, it is likely that relations were established between them. Of King Shenguttuvan of Kerala it was said in the 2nd century A.D. that:

> His might spreads even to the fertile land
> Of the crude Greeks who speak a barbarous tongue.

This is a hyperbolical way of saying that the king received presents from Alexandria which, in accordance with Asian conventions, were regarded as tribute. Two centuries earlier, Cleopatra had planned to send her son Caesarion to India so that he would be safe from the murderous plans of Octavian, and this suggests that she was in communication with the ruler of the principal Indian seaport involved in the Alexandrian trade—Muziris—and that relations between her and the Chera king were sufficiently friendly for her to think of trusting this distant and notably hospitable monarch with the precious life of her son.

By the 1st century A.D., according to the unknown Greek mariner who compiled the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, there were at least five ports in Malabar to which the Greek sailors came. The localities of most of them are hard to determine with any exactitude, but it is certain that Muziris stood on the site of Cranganore at the mouth of the Periyar River and that this was the leading mart of the Malabar Coast; other active ports at the time were probably Kottayam, Tripunithura and Pantalayini Kollam near Calicut. The trade with the West increased rapidly during the generation after the death of Cleopatra. According to Strabo, by 24 B.C. at least 120 ships set sail annually from Myos Hormos on the Red Sea to India, and during the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., when the trade reached its heights, the fleets and the ships became even larger, 'agitating the white foam', as a Sangham poet described them, until 'Muziris resounded with their noise'. No detailed description of ancient Muziris has survived, but in *Shilappadikaram* Ilango Adigal presents an evocative picture of Kaveripattam, the contemporary port of the Chola kings on the Coast of Coromandel, which Muziris must have resembled very closely.

He describes the sunlit terraces and the loopholed towers looking out over the harbour. The Greeks have wealthy homes in the city, and sailors from distant lands seem at home there. There are great warehouses for foreign merchandise, and on the beaches flagstaffs mark the dumps of goods landed from the ships and watched by special guards. Lighthouses have been built to show ships their way into the harbour.

Pearls, gems mined in the Western Ghats, fine Indian fabrics and perfumes, and the exotic products of the jungles were among the commodities which the Greeks sought, but above all they came to the Malabar Coast for pepper, which the Malayalis called 'the passion of the Greeks'. In exchange the foreign merchants offered wine and ceramics, Alexandrian bronzework, and fair-skinned slaves, particularly boys and girls for the households of the Dravidian kings. Above all, they brought gold and silver coins, and these were in the greatest demand; they formed the first currency of Kerala, and helped to establish the beginnings

of a money economy in the coastal towns, which for many centuries existed alongside a barter economy in the hinterland of the country.

But the Greeks did not come merely as traders. Their powers as craftsmen were appreciated by a people who were still technologically backward. They introduced elaborate forms of constructional woodwork, and their carpenters were in demand to build the palaces of the Dravidian kings. Their skill in metalwork is commemorated even today in Trivandrum by a type of bronze lamp, shaped in the form of a stylized bird, which is carried before the Maharajas of Travancore during certain religious ceremonies, and which still bears the name of 'the Greek lamp'.

The Greeks also acted as mercenary soldiers; in the Pandyan kingdom they guarded the entrance to the royal palace and the gates to the city of Madurai, and it is possible that they performed similar services in Kerala. There is a tradition that two cohorts of Roman soldiers guarded the temple of Augustus at Muziris. At first sight it seems most unlikely that twelve hundred men would be sent to guard a temple in a far Asian port frequented only by Greek mariners. But the temple and the body of soldiers may both have existed at Muziris without necessarily being linked together, the soldiers serving as Western mercenaries hired by the Chera kings to guard the port city against possible attack by rival kings.

The Malayalis disliked the Greeks, whose harsh voices, arrogant manners and addiction to toddy they regarded as crude. On one occasion at least strife broke out openly. The Chera king Imaiyavaramban Nedunjaral Adan fought and defeated a force of Yavanas (Ionians) whom he brought back to Vanchi as captives, 'their hands tied behind and oil poured on their heads'; in ransom they gave him diamonds and costly vessels. There is no evidence of any armed expedition to Kerala on the part of the Alexandrians, either alone or with Roman support, and it is likely that the whole affair was a minor brush caused by the reluctance of the Greek merchants to meet the king's expectations of tribute or by some breach of protocol on their part.

If, on the whole, matters went relatively smoothly between the Chera kings and the foreigners who came to trade at their seaports, the relationships between Kerala and the other Dravidian kingdoms was marked by frequent warfare. Militarily the Cheras were always the weakest of the three dynasties, a fact of which Megasthenes appears to have been aware as early as the 3rd century B.C. when he compared the relatively scanty forces of the king of the 'Charmoe' with those of his neighbours. The poems that praise the Chera kings talk of vast military triumphs, of great expeditions to the Himalayas, of conquests of the Greeks in their kingdom beyond the mountains (a recollection of the already vanished Bactrian Greek kingdoms in the Hindu Kush), but these accounts must be regarded as purely fanciful; the farthest expeditions which the Cheras of this era really carried out were against the Cholas in Coimbatore and the Nilgiri Hills, and against the Kadambas who inhabited the Konkan coast to the north of Mangalore. The *Shilappadikaram* claims, indeed, that 'among the three monarchs, the western king, born in the immortal Chera line, wore the garland of suzerainty'. But there is no evidence that at any time during the Sangham epoch the Cheras met either the Pandyas or the Cholas even on equal terms. On the contrary, they appear to have tried to gain whatever advantage they might from using their relatively small army to maintain a balance of power. In the extremely fragmentary records of the wars in which they were involved, the Cheras usually fight in alliance with the Cholas against the Pandyas or with the Pandyas against the Cholas. Often, through miscalculation, they ended on the losing side, and suffered consequent humiliations. Some Chera kings were captured in battle, and others were killed.

Yet, thanks to the protecting mountains and their fierce Nair soldiers, the early Chera kings kept their realm intact, and the common people seem to have suffered comparatively little from the wars. The picture of civil life that emerges from the Sangham poems is even a rather pleasing one. The worst rigidities of the caste system had not yet developed; untouchability was unknown. Religious tolerance was complete, and side by side

with the old tribal cults of the Dravidians there was an equal flourishing of Vedic Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Learning and the arts flourished in ancient Kerala, and the Chera kings were their patrons. Music and the dance were already highly developed, with their own elaborate rules, and there appears to have been at least a rudimentary form of the dramatic tradition which later, after many changes, evolved into Kathakali. Poets were numerous, particularly among the Buddhists and Jains, and were held in high esteem; some lived permanently in the palace at Vanchi, and others wandered through the country attended by their own courts of disciples. Among them were celebrated poetesses, for women were allowed an equal share of education in ancient Kerala, and their status, as always among the Nairs, was high; they appear to have been in no way secluded, and queens took part in state councils and were expected to speak their views openly on matters of policy. Marriage was by choice, between adults, and the remarriage of widows was not discouraged. Sexual morals seem to have been permissive; female courtesans and boy prostitutes are mentioned freely in the literature of the age. Beyond the bounds of their own temples and hermitages the Brahmins wielded little influence over the social life or even the culture of Kerala. Whatever may have been the later developments on the Malabar Coast, at this early period it appears to have been the slowest of the Dravidian kingdoms to accept Aryanization; the poems written in Kerala during the Sangham age are notable, in comparison with those emanating from the Chola and the Pandya kingdoms, for the purity of their Tamil language, which contains remarkably few words derived from Sanskrit.

When this silver age of the Cheras came to an end is uncertain; from the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. until the early 9th century a dark age, without internal records of any kind, settled over Kerala. Only by a few slender lines of contact with the outer world do we have even a slight knowledge of what took place there during those six blank centuries. Trade with the West continued at least until the first half of the 6th century, for coins of all the Byzantine emperors up to Justin I have been dis-

covered in Kerala, and it was during Justin's reign that the last of the known travellers from the ancient Levant reached the Malabar Coast and briefly recorded this part of his journey. This was Cosmas Indicopleustes ('The Indian Traveller'), a Nestorian from Alexandria who arrived between 520 and 525 A.D., founded a flourishing Christian church, saw the pepper plants growing, and wrote the first description of the coconut palms of Kerala. He also noted that five ports were still active in the pepper trade and in the export of sandalwood cut in the Western Ghats. Cosmas gave no hint of any state of crisis that might explain the fact that he was the last recorder of the old Alexandrian trade with Kerala, which by now had lasted for at least six centuries; in fact he wrote like a man describing a state of affairs likely to continue indefinitely. Yet not very long after his visit the great ships of the Greeks ceased for ever their journeys to the harbours of the Malabar Coast.

Cosmas arrived—though he seems to have been unaware of it—at the time when the mysterious Kalabras were just beginning to create political chaos on an unprecedented scale in South India. This race of warriors, who appeared first at the end of the 5th century, were ruthless and predatory in spite of their adherence to the Buddhist religion, and so warlike that even Tamil traditions admit that the Chola, Pandya and Chera kings were all taken captive by the Kalabra king Achchutavikranta, who exterminated many of the smaller chieftains and even plundered the temples. The Kalabras terrorized the south for several generations, until, at the beginning of the 7th century, they were finally defeated by the resurgent Pandyas. By the time trade began again the Moslem conquest of Egypt had severed direct contact between Byzantium and the Far East.

When Kerala stands once again in a rather fitful historical light at the beginning of the 9th century, the dynastic pattern of South India seems to have changed only in the fact that the Pallavas, rulers of remotely Iranian ancestry, have squeezed the Cholas into a tiny subject principality in the northern part of Tamilnad which they formerly ruled. The Pandyas still retain Madurai, and the Ay kings Vijinjam. Even the same kind of

wars go on, with the same enemies. But whether the rulers really belong to the old lineages, or are members of new families adopting and perpetuating old titles, is not certain. The Chera kings whose inscriptions appear on the new stone temples bear the family name of Kulasekhara, which has a Ceylonese ring, but there is nothing to tell whether they are descendants of the old Cheras or strangers who came from across the sea in the dark centuries. From their new capital of Mahodayapuram on the sea coast near Cranganore they rule over a reconstituted kingdom, including the whole of present Kerala from the crest of the mountains to the sea, with the exception of the tributary Ay kingdom and the area around Cape Comorin, now held by the Pandyas.

Since the Sangham epoch, there appear by the 9th century to have been considerable changes in the balance of power within Kerala. The region to the south of Cochin, known as Venad and centring on the seacoast town of Quilon, was politically one of the most important divisions of the Kulasekhara realm; unlike most of the other districts of Kerala, which were ruled by governors or naduvazhis, Venad was a tributary kingdom, having gained a measure of independence after the fall of the first Chera empire. Quilon competed with Cranganore as one of the leading ports of the new Kerala; it was frequented by Arabs and Nestorian Christians, and was building up a trade with China, whose merchants had now become very active in Indian waters and whose envoys visited the king of Venad.[1] Quilon in fact acquired such importance in medieval Kerala that the epoch whose beginning coincided with the establishment of the new Chera empire in 825 under the rule of Kulasekhara Varman was called the Kollam or Quilon Era; it was followed officially by the states of Travancore and Cochin until their incorporation in

[1] The contact with China was to have a great influence on many details of Keralan life, including the design of its wooden palaces, the shape of its sampan-like boats, and the method of fishing with a great counterweighted dip net operated from the shore and actually called the 'Chinese net'. In old houses around Quilon one still often sees great olive-coloured Chinese water pots, and fragments of blue-and-white porcelain can be picked up on the beaches.

India during 1947 A.D.—or 1122 K.E. if one still adheres, as some Malayali traditionalists do, to the Kollam Era.

The empire of the Kulasekharas lasted for three centuries, which were dominated politically by the relations between the Cheras and the Cholas, in religious and social terms by the rapid strengthening of Hinduism as the dominant religion and of the Brahmins as the dominant caste, and, as a rather surprising accompaniment of this process, by the rise of powerful non-Hindu communities dedicated to the Middle Eastern religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Among the Cholas, in their feudal subjection to the alien Pallavas, the desire to re-establish the old glory of the dynasty survived, and about the middle of the 9th century Viyayala Chola took advantage of strife between the Pallavas and the Pandyas to seize the city of Tanjore and establish a small quasi-independent kingdom. His son, Aditya I, at first maintained the tributary relationship to the Pallava king Aparajita, and helped him to defeat the Pandyas. As a reward he was given new territories, and used his greater strength to attack and defeat the Pallavas and to regain a great deal of the land which that dynasty had wrested from his ancestors. Having thus established himself, Aditya began to revive the old three-cornered game of Dravidian princely politics, allying himself to the king of Kerala, Sthanu Ravi, in a joint attack on the territory held by the Pandyas in the region of Coimbatore.

The alliance between Cheras and Cholas continued through the subsequent reign of Parantaka I, who married a daughter of the Kerala king Rama Varma Kulasekhara, and in alliance with him invaded the heartland of the Pandya kingdom, captured Madurai, and defeated a Ceylonese army which had come to the aid of the Pandyas. In these campaigns the Nairs of Kerala not only served their own king, but in many cases were made commanders in the Chola army because of their great reputation as courageous and well-trained warriors. An illuminating glimpse of the chivalrous code which still existed even in wartime among the Dravidian princes is given by the story of the Pandya king Ramasingha who, after his defeat by the Cheras and the Cholas,

fled to Kerala and took refuge in the house of his mother, who was a Chera princess; there, according to the conventions of the time, he was safe in the heart of an enemy land.

The Cheras took advantage of the war against the Pandyas to end the quasi-independence of the Ay kingdom in South Travancore; doubtless they wished to ensure themselves against a possible change in the attitude of the Cholas once their conquests in the Pandya kingdom had been digested. Thus Trivandrum, which is now the capital, first became definitely a part of Kerala, and Vijinjam, the old metropolis of the Ay dynasty, was transformed into the southernmost port and fortress of the realm of the Cheras.

Almost throughout the 10th century relations between the Cheras and the Cholas retained a superficial cordiality, and in each reign there were intermarriages between the two houses. This relationship came to an end with the accession of Raja Raja the Great, under whom the Chola empire became even more powerful than it had been in the Sangham epoch. Raja Raja served notice that the alliance had terminated by a lightning attack south of Trivandrum in 989. Yet for a time he occupied himself with conquests elsewhere; only ten years later did he actually invade South Travancore and inflict a defeat on the Cheras which he commemorated in an inscription at the temple of Suchindram referring to 999 as 'worthy to be worshipped by all others as the year in the whole of eternity'. Despite these high words, the battle seems to have been a skirmish which gained the Cholas a few square miles of villages and rice paddies. Nevertheless, it opened the hundred years' war between Cheras and Cholas which occupied the two dynasties for the whole of the 11th century.

By this time the Cholas had developed into ruthless imperialists of a type previously unseen in Dravidian India, and an independent Kerala stood in the way of their ambition to rule the whole of the south. The Cheras, for their part, were bent on keeping their kingdom intact and undestroyed, and the war developed a ferocity which does not appear to have characterized earlier wars in the Dravidian south.

The Cholas attacked from the north as well as the south. In the reign of Raja Raja the Great, the Chera capital of Mahodayapuram was assaulted and sacked, and under his successor, Rajendra Chola, the conqueror of Ceylon, the Tamil armies captured Vijinjam and Kandular Salai (a fortress in the south defended by young Nambudiri Brahmins), while another attack was launched on Mahodayapuram, in which the Chera king Bhaskara Ravi Varman I was killed. One of his successors, Vira Kerala Kulasekhara, was captured by the Cholas in 1028 and barbarously executed by being trampled to death under the feet of an elephant. Nevertheless, though Rajendra Chola led his armies north to the Ganges Valley as well as south to Ceylon, he did not succeed in completely subduing Kerala. It is true that during the reign of the Chera King Rajasimha (1028–1043) much of the country was under alien rule, but there were still areas of resistance which were extended as soon as the rising power of the Chalukyas in the Deccan forced the Cholas to turn their attention northward during the mid-11th century.

Yet the strain on the organization of the Chera kingdom, and on the manpower of the military Nairs, was at times almost unendurable. In the traditional Indian manner, bribery was regarded as a proper means of warfare, and the lesser chiefs were sometimes bought away by the Cholas from their allegiance to the Kulasekhara dynasty; sometimes also, in Nair independence, they rebelled merely because the overlords had become too weak to keep them in subordination, but such defections appear to have been comparatively few. Most of the warriors remained loyal, though the fact that young Brahmins were trained for military services at Kandular suggests that the Nairs themselves were becoming dangerously reduced, largely because at this period the warriors began to form themselves into the chavers, or suicide companies, dedicated to taking any risk in the wars against the Cholas. From this time also dates the institution of the kalari, the village gymnasium organized to train boys in the arts of war. The kalaris appeared in every Kerala community, large and small, and the whole Nair caste seems to have been placed on a war footing, with its males more or less conscripted

to defend the domains of the Chera kings against the persistent threats of attack through the passes of the Ghats or along the coast from Cape Comorin.

By 1070, profiting from the difficulties which the Cholas were experiencing on their northern borders, the Malayalis under Bhaskara Ravi Varman III had freed most of Kerala from alien occupation, working in collaboration with the Pandyas who had emerged once again as a power in Madurai. Even Vijinjam in the south was recovered, and the capital of Mahodayapuram was rebuilt. Then, in 1070, the last of the great Chola kings, Kulottunga, came to power, and set about recovering the former conquests of his dynasty. He defeated the Pandyas, and overran their domains, advancing from the south around Cape Comorin to push the Chera defences up to Trivandrum; he even raided as far north as Quilon. This final struggle continued for thirty years, and fortune did not favour the Keralans until Rama Varma Kulasekhara began to reign in 1090. It was he who finally fought the Cholas to a standstill on the borders of Kerala by 1102, the year of his death. From this date it was the resurgent power of the Pandyas against which the Cheras had to struggle; early in the 12th century, even before Kulottunga Chola died in 1118, the Pandyas were making attacks on the southern frontiers of Kerala.

Such victory as the Cheras won left their empire mortally wounded. Communications and cultivation had been interrupted by the Chola raids, and the foreign trade on which Kerala so much depended had declined catastrophically. The loss of revenue from this source may have been the most important reason why, after the last burning at the end of the 11th century, no attempt was made to rebuild the great palace of the Kulasekharas at Mahodayapuram. The town was abandoned to the local chieftains of the region, and Rama Varma Kulasekhara moved first to Cranganore, and then to Quilon, in the kingdom of Venad, where he established his capital in 1102. Whether the subordinate king who had previously reigned in Venad was displaced is not clear, but there is reason to believe that during the 11th century one ruler of this region collaborated with the

Cholas; and for this reason his family may have lost control of the principality. Certainly from this time onwards the kings of Venad maintained the dynastic name of Kulasekhara belonging to the later Cheras; it was still in use among their successors, the rulers of Travancore, until the present Maharaja gave up his legal claims to power in 1949 when his state was finally absorbed into the Indian Republic.

Though after 1102 the kings of Venad still regarded themselves as the successors of the Cheras, and claimed an imperial status as suzerains of the whole Malabar Coast, in practice the withdrawal of the capital to Quilon, a hundred miles down the coast, meant the end of Kerala as a unified state until it was reconstituted more than eight centuries later, in 1956. The rulers of Venad concentrated their power in the south, and in time they lost control even of Quilon, so that by the 18th century, when Martanda Varma began his career of reconquest, only the region between Cape Comorin and Trivandrum remained in the hands of the Kulasekharas.

The north and centre of Kerala split up at the beginning of the 12th century into an assortment of small principalities, where local Nair—or, less frequently, Brahmin—chieftains set themselves up as Rajas. Precedence was eventually taken by the ruler of the inland state of Ernad, who in the 11th century pushed down to the sea and seized a strip of coastline where he established the city of Kozhikode, later known to Europeans as Calicut, and not only built up a trading centre to which came merchants from many parts of Asia, but also, under the title of Zamorin, laid claim to be the residuary legatee of the Cheras in Malabar and hence suzerain of the whole region, setting the seal on his pretensions by taking over the ceremony of Mamankam. By the time the Portuguese arrived he had given some reality to his claim, through the superiority and strength of his Nair armies on land, and at sea through the naval support of the Arab traders who had settled in Calicut.

But even in the north of Kerala the rise of the Zamorin to this degree of power was comparatively late, and when Marco Polo travelled along the coast in the 1290's he found a series of small

independent kingdoms—Comorin, Quilon, Ely (Cannanore), Malabar—whose rulers were 'tributary to none'. Yet it was only a few years after Marco Polo's journey that a Kulasekhara king appeared in Quilon and, in a meteoric rise to power, not only recovered much of the old Chera kingdom, but also carried out a series of conquests more extensive than those of the most boastful kings of the Sangham epoch.

Ravi Varma Kulasekhara became ruler of a diminished Venad in 1299. By this time, following the pendulum pattern of south Indian dynastic politics, the Pandya dynasty of Madurai was once again in the ascendant, and it appears that Venad had actually become tributary to Madurai, a condition which its ruler wished to terminate. Ravi Varma seems to have been one of the most brilliant men in the India of his time, not only 'firm in battle', but also 'master of the sixty-four arts'. To his court he attracted scholars and poets from all parts of Dravidian India, and he himself was celebrated not only as a competent musician, but also as a Sanskrit scholar who wrote at least one play in that language, *Pradyumnabhyu dayam*, which has survived and is still read by a few specialists.

The time when this poet-prince began to reign in Quilon was a critical one for South India. The power of the old king of Madurai, Maravarman, had declined and the army's support was divided between his sons, Sundara Pandya, the recognized heir apparent, and Vira Pandya, the ambitious and vigorous son of a concubine. Tamilnad was thrown into confusion by the civil war between the two brothers, and the situation gave an opening for the first Moslem invasion of the Dravidian south, when Malik Kafur, the general of the reigning Sultan of Delhi, carried out in 1310 a daring raid on the Pandya kingdom. Both of the warring brothers fled at his approach, and Kafur returned to Delhi in 1311 with an enormous booty of gold and jewels, as well as six hundred elephants and thousands of horses. As soon as he had departed, Vira Pandya and Sundara Pandya gathered their forces again and took up their civil war where it had been left off.

By now Ravi Varma had conquered a number of small

neighbouring Malayali principalities and established himself as the virtual ruler of southern and central Kerala, though there is nothing to show that his rule ever extended into the northern preserves of the Zamorin of Calicut. At the head of a great Nair army, he crossed the frontier into the Pandya kingdom, declaring himself its suzerain. Vira Pandya came to meet him and was defeated. But Ravi Varma did not install Sundara Pandya, the legitimate son of the now dead Maravarmana, as king. Instead he made a triumphal and unresisted march through the rest of Tamilnad, and reached Kanchipuram, traditional capital of the Cholas and the Pallavas and one of the seven holy cities of India. There he was crowned Emperor of South India, and took a Pandyan princess—a sister of the warring sons of Maravarman—for his wife, while he removed any possibility of doubt in the minds of later historians about the extent of his conquests by leaving an inscription on one of the temples of Kanchipuram.

There are various opinions on the motives which inspired Ravi Varma to undertake his war of conquest. Some South Indian historians have suggested that he understood, ahead of his time, the nature of the Moslem threat, and marched into Tamilnad to prevent a repetition of Malik Kafur's raid. This is pure conjecture, unsupported by any epigraphical evidence. It seems more likely that Ravi Varma's action was a quite traditional move in the ancient game of dynastic musical chairs which the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas had been playing in southern India since before the beginning of the Christian era. The decline of the Cholas and the dissensions among the Pandyas provided him with an opportunity no Chera ruler had enjoyed before, and he took every advantage of it to pursue his brief imperial career.

Ravi Varma died in Quilon in 1313, his empire still intact. His successor according to the matrilineal system was a cousin named Vira Udaya Martanda Varma, who defeated an army which Vira Pandya raised against him in 1316, only to be driven out of Kanchipuram in 1317 by Mupiddi Nayak, one of the family which eventually displaced the Pandyas as kings of

Madurai. Parts of Tamilnad, particularly in the inland district of Tirunellveli on the eastern side of the Ghats, remained under the control of the kings of Venad for some time afterwards; when they were lost, the successors of the Cheras ceased to be powers in South India until the creation of Travancore by Martanda Varma four centuries afterwards.

Meanwhile, to complete the picture of Kerala as it was when the first Europeans began to arrive on the eve of the 14th century, there were, apart from Venad and Calicut, at least two states important enough to play a considerable part in the later history of the Malabar Coast. The first was Perumpaddappu Swarupam, which later became known as Cochin. This state included the old Kulasekhara capital of Mahodayapuram, and its rulers, like those of Venad, claimed to be descended from the ancient Chera line; the Brahmins recognized them as Kshatriyas, an honour granted neither to the Zamorins of Calicut nor to the remaining independent line of princes, the Kolathiris who ruled over the region surrounding Cannanore on the far northern marches of Kerala, and who controlled in that city one of the most active ports on the Malabar Coast.

After the end of the great Chola war, Kerala lost political unity, but in compensation trade returned rapidly once the paralysing dynastic conflicts had ended, and, though there were often minor struggles between rival rajas and even between village chieftains until the final establishment of the Pax Britannica in the 19th century, these rarely interfered with trade; the water routes between the pepper gardens and the ports were usually kept open in the interests of all the warring parties. Each of the four important states of medieval Kerala has at least one thriving port to which it sought to attract foreign trade (Cannanore, Calicut, Cochin and Quilon), while one minor ruler, the Raja of Kayankulam, became prosperous because of the trading facilities of his small state, and built out of his riches the charming Krishnapuram Palace, with its fine mural paintings, which still stands among the coastal coconut groves between Quilon and Alleppey. For some time, under the Raja of Cranganore, the ancient estuary port of Muziris continued as one of the main

centres of foreign trade, and its ruler might well have been one of the most powerful kings of Kerala if the unfriendly action of the Periyar river had not silted up his port in 1341 and opened a channel into the inland waters belonging to the rival ruler of Cochin. By this period the sea had long retreated from Kottayam and Tripunithura, while neither Trivandrum, Alleppey nor Tellicherry, all of which were busy ports in later centuries, was yet in use. Of the main ports, Quilon, the farthest south, controlled most of the China trade; Calicut and Cannanore were the centres most favoured by the Arabs; Cochin came into its own, largely for political reasons, only after the Portuguese arrived, but its uniquely sheltered harbour—the broad Vembanad Lake protected by the long sand ridge of the island of Vypeen—was a great advantage, and already by the early 15th century many traders had discovered it.

If trade patterns in Kerala during and after the second Chera empire resembled those already established when the Greek traders arrived before the beginning of the Christian era, the general shape of the political system seems also to have changed comparatively little; there are merely more detailed records of it, thanks to the temple inscriptions and the copperplate records, which have survived from this later epoch. While the Cheras exercised a general feudal power up to the 12th century and could demand taxes and military service from all parts of their realm, the local chieftains retained considerable independence both of the kings and of their provincial governors. Petty rajas could and often did carry on local wars; they were also entitled to take half of the land tax, which altogether was assessed at a fifth of the gross produce. Instead of engaging directly in trade, the kings seem to have been content with the dues levied on imports and exports, though, like the governments of modern states, rulers in Kerala appear at a later date to have entered into trade arrangements with European merchants to guarantee a minimum of commodities. The native merchants engaged in the foreign trade were organized into powerful guilds which enjoyed much political influence through their ability to help the rulers with money, ships and even soldiers in times of need; they

were organized according to religious communities, with separate guilds of Hindu, Moslem, Christian and Jewish merchants.

If one can judge from the titles recorded in temple inscriptions, the state bureaucracy was large and varied in function. There were several ranks of military officers and several kinds of scribes, ranging downwards from the secretary whose office was to record the spoken orders of the king; there were Treasury Officers and Police Officers, who enforced an elaborate penal code with specific and often harsh penalties for a wide variety of offences. Special officers dealt with temple endowments, which, for reasons I shall shortly discuss, increased rapidly at this period. The services were staffed largely by Nairs, who held the military commands, and a whole sub-caste of whom, the Menons, were scribes and secretaries. Even at this period, however, there was a tendency for the unendowed and landless Tamil Brahmins, as distinct from the native Nambudiris, to find their way by virtue of superior education into important posts in the courts of kings and lesser rajas. Men of low caste, however, were strictly excluded from the service of Keralan princes until well into the 20th century; the belief which prevailed throughout this period in caste pollution by physical proximity made their presence socially unacceptable.

Parallel with this royal bureaucracy, a whole network of representative institutions was in operation. These included the merchants' guilds in the towns, and the village associations, which had, among other rights, that of negotiating for the remission of taxes in years of bad harvest. There were also more elevated bodies bearing titles like 'the Three Hundred' and 'the Six Hundred', assemblies giving expression to popular wishes, and probably fulfilling the same functions as the 'five assemblies' mentioned a thousand years before in the *Shilappadikaram*. Even after the break-up of the second Chera empire in 1102 these assemblies continued in the succession states; a 'Six Hundred' met in Venad as late as 1196 during the reign of Vira Rama Varma.

Yet, despite the superficial similarities between the Keralas of

the 2nd and 10th centuries, profound religious and social changes had taken place during the Middle Ages, and these resulted in significant shifts of power.

5

The Triumph of the Brahmins

LIKE almost every other part of India, Kerala was deeply affected by the Hindu revival which gathered force during the 8th and 9th centuries. Unlike their eclectic predecessors of the Sangham era, the Kulasekhara kings became dedicated Hindus and devotees of Vishnu in his various aspects; the conqueror king Ravi Varma in the 14th century actually assumed the title of Protector of the Three Vedas. At the same time, under great teachers like Sankara, the cult of Siva gained a prestige almost equal to that of Vishnu, and the character of Hindu philosophy was transformed by a counter-reformation which turned into a retreat the advance of the reforming creeds of Buddhism and Jainism.

Sankara himself was a Malayali, a Nambudiri Brahmin from the village of Kaladi not far from Cochin, who lived in the early 8th century. In his reputedly short life—he is said to have died before reaching the age of thirty-three—his achievements were extraordinary, though probably not nearly so great as the people of Kerala are inclined to place to his credit. He was a remarkable devotional poet, as well as a perceptive commentator of the classic religious texts of Hinduism, and in developing in his own philosophical works the doctrines of Advaitya Vedanta, with their essential monotheism, he took over much of the metaphysical apparatus of Buddhism and at the same time sought to simplify the chaos of a Hinduism in which the accretions of local cults had submerged the Vedic beliefs. He is credited with great journeys over the face of India, with founding mutts or monasteries for Vendantist devotees and with—as a typical Keralan historian puts it—'reforming the morals and manners of the various sects and sections within the Hindu fold'. As if these

tasks were not enough for a man who died at the age of thirty-two, Sankara is also widely believed in Kerala to have established —or re-established in the Brahmin view—the sacerdotal pre-eminence of the Nambudiris and in doing so to have solidified the pyramidical structure of the caste system. But, though Sankara's writings survive, very little is known with any exactitude about his life, and it is likely that his name, as the most celebrated of all Keralan religious teachers, has become a focal point around which, in the minds of many of his fellow Malayalis, a long and complex development lasting over centuries has been condensed into legendary form.

Sankara appears in fact to have been the manifestation rather than the initiator of a movement of religious revival which was already in progress at the time of his birth and which did not reach completion until long after his death. It is certain that both Buddhism and Jainism had strong followings in Kerala until well into the 10th century, shown by the relics of temples and sculptures from both religions which are found in many places on the Malabar Coast.

The earliest temples so far discovered in Kerala in connection with any religion date from the 8th century. Before that time temples were built entirely of wood, and sculpture appears to have been carried out in the same perishable material; even today Keralans are far more adept at carving wood than sculpting stone. In the 8th century, however, the influence of Pallava architecture, with its stone temples—both rock-cut and constructed—spread from Tamilnad to Kerala; the Malayalis evolved a local hybrid style in which wooden structures of ancient form were raised on masonry foundations and low supporting walls.

Hindus, Jains and Buddhists all adopted the new fashion of working in stone. A few early temples were hewn out of cliff-sides, and at the village of Kottukhal between Trivandrum and Kottayam I saw a tiny 8th-century Siva temple which had been cut—like the famous rathas of Mahabalipuram—out of a large whale-backed boulder standing among the rice paddies. Constructed temples appeared shortly afterwards, in the 9th century,

and many of them were Buddhist and Jain; some of these were entirely abandoned with the triumph of Brahminism, and only fragments of them remain, but others were taken over and adapted by the Hindus; the Nagaraja temple at Nagercoil, for example, still carries on its walls no less than six Jain images, including three of Mahavira.

Some of the finest sculptures of these heretical religions, such as the seated Buddha which now stands in the village of Mavelikara and the remarkable series of Jain carvings on a rock face at Tiruchanattumalai in South Travancore, were carved fairly late in the 10th century. Moreover, there is epigraphical evidence which confirms that in the early 10th century Buddhist temples in Kerala were still influential enough to gain the support of powerful patrons. Round about 920 A.D. Vikramaditya Varaguna, the last Ay king of Vijinjam, donated a large estate in his realm to the Buddhist temple of Tirumalapadam, which lay in the Chera kingdom close to Alleppey. The grant, recorded on the Paliyam copper plate, ends with an exhortation from the king to the trustees of the temple, which reflects typically Buddhist sentiments:

> This land, like a wife, should be kept close to your hearts and safeguarded, age after age, from the possibility of enjoyment by others. Oh, men, hasten your minds to deeds of merit! The God of Death, terrible with open mouth, is roaring near awaiting his time, and as if to show him favour, his father, the Lord of Day, hurries away in rapid marches the remainder of your lives.

It is possible that when Vikramaditya Varaguna died and his dynasty ended, the decline of Buddhism in Kerala was hastened by the loss of one of its most friendly protectors.

After the 10th century that decline seems to have been extremely rapid. There are no Buddhist relics which can be attributed to a later period, and none of the Europeans who began to arrive at the end of the 13th century mentions the presence of Buddhists. Some elements of the religion may have survived in folk lore. The two images of Buddha which I saw by the roadside in Keralan villages had both been garlanded with jasmine

and one had been quite elaborately decorated with sandalwood paste; according to Professor A. Aiyappan, Buddha was transformed in the minds of Kerala peasants into the demon Chattan, who, if properly placated, brings good luck. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism did not vanish quite completely into the shadows of popular superstition. A remnant of adherents found refuge and still survive in the jungles of Wynad, where the finest ancient Jain temple in Kerala is to be found in a thicket near the village of Sultan's Battery; and where some of the forest tribes still call on Jain priests to perform their marriage ceremonies.

Such a meagre survival of two religions which were full of power and prestige when the Jain prince Ilango Adigal wrote in the 2nd century, emphasizes the extraordinary change in popular religious attitudes that must have taken place between the 10th and the 12th centuries. Some Kerala historians have attributed it to a physical suppression, instigated by the Brahmins. Yet there is no fragment of evidence to suggest persecution, and when we remember the complete tolerance extended to Christians and Jews until the Portuguese arrived to introduce European forms of bigotry, it is difficult to believe that a Brahmin equivalent of the Holy Inquisition ever existed.

Besides, there are more reasonable explanations for the decline of the two heretical religions. Buddhism in Kerala belonged to the stricter Theravada tradition, which did not show the willingness to absorb local superstitions that made Mahayanist Buddhism so popular among the peoples of the Himalayas. There is an inflexibility about southern Buddhism which Malayalis would in the long run find repugnant, particularly when they were also being offered on the one hand the rich devotional patterns of a revived cult of Krishna, and on the other the intellectually fascinating and—moreover—home-grown philosophy of Sankara's Advaitya Vedanta. To this temperamental consideration, which would apply almost equally to Jainism and its failure to compete in Kerala with a revived Hinduism, one must add the fact that under the later Cheras Hinduism gained a social and political acceptance which it had not enjoyed in the Sangham era. State and temple drew to-

gether, and to the more intimate appeals of devotionalism and philosophy were added those of spectacular ceremonies carried out with a lavishness that only the support of the princes made possible. Finally, one must take account of the possibility that in ancient South India there were few people other than monks who were exclusively either Buddhist or Jain. The accounts of these religions in *Shilappadikaram* suggest that in the early days of Aryanization the people of Kerala were expansive and experimental in their attitudes towards the new religions; neither Buddhism nor Jainism had the strength of religious exclusivism which comes into Kerala with Christianity and Islam.

As the fortunes of the Jains and Buddhists descended, those of the Brahmins rose, socially as well as sacerdotally, until they were able to establish in Kerala a Hindu community more elaborately and rigidly stratified than any other in India. The teachings of Sankara probably had far less to do with this development than the long wars of the 11th century which, like all great catastrophes of their kind, shook loose the fabric of society and allowed for profound changes in the class structure and in the distribution of power.

The lever that propelled the Nambudiri Brahmins into a position of power was the development of the jenmi system of land-holding. During the Chola wars the only way in which land—and the houses built upon it—could be effectively protected from the armies raiding across Kerala was for it to become sacred, in other words to become the property either of a temple or of a Brahmin joint family. The landowner would transfer his title by a transaction recorded in Tamil and written with a stylus on cadjan or palm leaves; he would then revert to the position of tenant, paying his priestly landlords a share of the produce. Over the century of strife, the temples and the Brahmin families gained jenmon rights over vast areas, particularly in Malabar, until most of the cultivated land except that held by kings and local chieftains was in their hands, and many of the Nairs became tenants, sub-letting to Ezhavas or employing Pulayas as serf labourers.

At the same time as they acquired economic power through

control of large areas of land, the Brahmins made use of the terrors and perils of the war to consolidate their spiritual ascendancy over the people, to such an extent that they began to use the threat of excommunication as a weapon even against the rulers. For example, in 1102, after he had shifted his capital to Quilon, Rama Varma Kulasekhara was forced to make a gift of land to one of the temples to atone for the sin of having caused offence to Brahmins.

Having brought from the north the Vedic concept of a society divided horizontally into castes, with themselves at the apex of the pyramid and even the rulers of the land below them, the Nambudiri Brahmins had never doubted their own superiority. It was long before the Malayalis took them at their own valuation, but by the 12th century they had finally won the recognition which they thought their due. As conservators and interpreters of holy law—and with the docile assistance of the civil power—they proceeded to transform the existing pattern of racial and tribal groups into a caste hierarchy so complex that when the Bengali teacher Vivekananda arrived in Kerala as recently as the end of the 19th century he declared it 'a madhouse of caste'. I have already listed the main divisions of the Keralan caste systems, but such a schematic arrangement gives no conception of the complexity created by the multitude of endogamous sub-divisions within each group. According to some estimates, among the Nairs alone there were more than a hundred groups, divided according to regions and occupations, between which intermarriage was impossible.

The caste system was supported by an elaborate pattern of sumptuary laws intended to deepen the difference between castes. Most important were the rules governing the distance at which pollution took place. A Nair must keep 16 feet from a Nambudiri, an Ezhava 16 feet from a Nair and 32 feet from a Nambudiri, a Pulaya 32 feet from an Ezhava, 48 feet from a Nair and 64 feet from a Nambudiri. Atmospheric and visual pollution were refinements peculiar to caste in Kerala. Lower-caste people were not allowed to walk on public roads, in case they polluted the air, while the very sight of a Nayadi, the unfortunate beggar

who represented the dregs of society, would force a Brahmin or a Nair to undergo ritual purification. Other rules minutely governed dwellings, adornments, clothes. Only the higher castes could tile the roofs of their houses or wear gold ornaments. Women belonging to castes below the Nairs were forbidden to wear clothes above the waist; though this rule has long fallen into disuse, still in many Kerala villages one sees old women of the Pulaya community who go bare-breasted.

Society in medieval Kerala was shaped not only by caste, but also by the parallel systems of matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance. The matrilineal system (Marumakkathayam) was probably the most widespread; it was followed by Nairs, Kshatriyas, Ambalavasis and Moplahs or Moslems of Mayalali race, and partially by the Ezhavas and the outcaste groups. Among Hindus, the Brahmins and the Kamalla castes of craftsmen were the principal groups who followed Makkathayam or patrilineal inheritance. Christians, Jews and Moslems of Arab descent also inherited patrilineally but differed from the Hindus by not living in joint families.

Marumakkathayam centred on the tarwad, the Nair family unit which consisted of all the descendants of a common ancestress in the female line; a man's children had no rights within his tarwad, since they belonged to his wife's family. The family property was administered by the eldest male member of the tarwad, who was called the karnavan; he had absolute powers of decision so far as management of the estate was concerned, but he could alienate no portion of the family property without the unanimous consent of the junior members. The system was ideally suited for a warrior people; the junior male members of the tarwad were provided for and—since the land was farmed by members of the lower castes—they had nothing to do but to fight or prepare for fighting. From early youth they trained in the kalaris, which Duarte Barbosa observed with admiration when he visited the Malabar Coast in the 16th century.

> When these Nairs are 7 years of age, they are immediately sent to school to learn all manner of feats of agility and gymnastics for the use of their weapons. First they learn to dance,

and then to tumble and for that purpose they render supple all their limbs from childhood, so that they can bend them in any direction. After they have had experience in this they teach them to manage the weapons which suit each the most, that is to say, bows, club dances, and most of them are taught the use of the sword and buckler which is of more common use among them. In this fencing there is much ability and science and there are very skilful men who teach this art who are called Pannikars. They are captains in war.

Schools were attached to the kalaris in which the young Nairs learnt Malayalam, and often Sanskrit and Tamil. A knowledge of the great Hindu epics and of other classical literature was encouraged. The Nair girls received some physical training and shared in the other studies so that they were often proficient in classical literature. An old Nair told me that in the 1890s his grandmother, who had been trained in one of the last of these traditional village schools, would regularly recite to her children and grandchildren, in Sanskrit, passages of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which she knew by heart.

The Nair women had a considerable say in the affairs of the tarwad, and enjoyed a freedom and security shared by very few other women in India. Marriage was a simple matter, without religious ceremonial; the tying of a thread (tali) around the bride's neck by the bridegroom and the presentation of an expensive cloth were—and still are among Nairs—sufficient to validate the ceremony. At the same time, the uncle of the bride would tie around her wrist a cord to signify that, despite her marriage, she still belonged to the matrilineal tarwad, as would her children. Generally speaking—though even in those days there appear to have been exceptions—the husband either lived in the wife's tarwad or became a 'visiting husband'. Divorce was simple, at the will of either party; it consisted of little more than the wife's closing the door on the unwanted spouse or the husband ceasing to call. Various forms of polyandry—a custom frequently encountered in societies where the women figure prominently—were socially acceptable. Because of the tarwad system, the Nairs did not suffer from two of the great scourges

of ordinary Indian marriages—the financially crippling dowry system and the socially induced tragedy of widowhood. Since the Nair bride always retained her rights in the tarwad and her title to a share as a member equal to all others, and since in any case she continued to live at home, a dowry was not necessary. If her husband died, she merely lived on in her family home, a full member of the tarwad, instead of having to endure the humiliating treatment meted out by the husband's family to most Indian widows.

The patrilineal joint family of the Nambudiri Brahmins was called the illom, and had its own peculiarities. Like the Nairs, the Nambudiris were anxious to safeguard their properties from division, but instead of instituting a democratic family council as the means of preventing unjustifiable fragmentation, they relied on a system of primogeniture which seems like a parody of the Freudian primal horde. Only the eldest male member of the illom was allowed to marry women of his own caste; he was allowed polygamy to the extent of four wives. Nevertheless there were large numbers of young Nambudiri women condemned to lives of perpetual spinsterhood within the seclusion of the household and, of course, many younger sons and brothers in every illom who did not expend their physical energies on either farming or warfare. To satisfy the abundant sexual needs of these superfluous Nambudiri males, the peculiar custom of Sambandham was evolved. A modification of the pollution laws allowed sexual contact between Nambudiri men and women of the Ambalavasi caste or of the higher sub-castes among the Nairs. In this way morganatic marriages—or perhaps rather concubinages—came into being; the Nambudiris were visiting paramours, and such unions were even less durable than those between Nairs. Very often polyandry took the form of a woman being shared by a visiting Nambudiri and a Nair husband.

That the proud and warlike Nairs should have accepted and even have felt honoured by an arrangement which in almost any other society would seem humilitating, is a sign of the degree to which, by the Middle Ages, the Brahmins had established their

social ascendancy in Kerala. The custom of Sambandham amazingly persisted in the rural areas to the end of the 19th century; I met a septuagenarian Ambalavasi who told me that his father had been a Brahmin, and described the anger on the part of his maternal uncles, elders of the tarwad, when the father went against understood customs by expressing an opinion on the future of his morganatic offspring.

Sambandham was an imposition that carried its own punishment. Every child of such a union took the caste of its mother, so that while the custom asserted the social superiority of the Nambudiris, it increased the numerical strength of the castes below them. At the same time, the fact that only the sons of one member of each illom were legitimate Brahmins meant that over the centuries the strength of the priestly caste declined, not merely in relation to the increasing numbers of Nairs and Ezhavas, but even absolutely, so that during the 19th century, when reliable statistics were at last available, the dwindling of these lords of Parusurama's creation became quite evident. By the 1941 census there were only 223 Nambudiri Brahmins left among more than a million people in the Trivandrum district, and, though the proportion is certainly higher in other areas, far less than 1 per cent of all Malayalis now belong to the highest Brahmin caste—a proportion which in the past would certainly not have been sufficient to assure their ascendancy.

But that argument goes ahead into the consequences of Sambandham. Here it is more appropriate to discuss its origins. A number of Malayali historians in recent years have regarded it as an integral part of the social complex which involved the dual system of inheritance, and have suggested that all of these institutions evolved or were even deliberately created during the Brahmin struggle for domination. When I met Professor Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, the most important advocate of this view, he expressed the theory in a clear and condensed form which I reproduce as I entered it in my diary immediately after my visit.

> E. K. P. claims that before the beginning of the Christian era the lands of the Dravidians were inherited matrilineally, but that under early Aryan influence the patrilineal system

was adopted. The reintroduction of the matrilineal system in castes below the Brahmins does not seem to have taken place until the 10th century; there are no Keralan inscriptions dating from before that century which indicate matrilineal property relationships. E.K.P. suggests that the reintroduction of the matrilineal system was coincidental with the coming to power of the Nambudiri Brahmins. The matrilineal system, combined with the custom of the Sambandham marriage of Nambudiris to Kshatriya, Ambalavasi or Nair women, ensured their dominance, particularly since in important families they made sure that the sons of Brahmins were in control.

Kunjan Pillai differs from other historians who maintain this view in his dating of the change of the inheritance system; he places it in the 10th century, but an earlier historian who holds the same general view, K. P. Padmanabha Menon, places it in the 13th century. Kunjan Pillai's epigraphical studies certainly confirm that the matrilineal system existed as early as the 10th century. But even his evidence does not present a convincing reason for assuming that it did *not* exist continuously before that time, since, although some inscriptions from the 9th and even 8th centuries have come to light, they are so few that the negative witness they present by merely not mentioning matrilineal succession is of slight value.

There are other and more serious problems which also come into one's mind in considering this theory. A regression to a past and more primitive social pattern after a lapse of ten centuries is *prima facie*, unlikely; the existence of the matrilineal system is more easily explained as a survival of an early Dravidian custom in a conservative and territorially isolated region among a people—the Nairs—who have shown considerable obstinacy in retaining their traditions. And why, when the Brahmins were powerless during the Sangham era, should the Nairs have imitated the Aryans and taken to the system of patrilineal inheritance prescribed by the Vedas, only, when the Vedic system of caste was established in all its completeness, to abandon it? These questions have not been answered, and therefore one must regard the case for a reversion to the matrilineal system as un-

proven and unconvincing; almost certainly the system existed without interruption from early times.

Sambandham must be considered separately. It was certainly utilized by the Brahmins in order to consolidate their power, once achieved. But does this mean that the practice, unknown in other communities dominated by Brahmins, was actually instituted by them? Here again we are faced with a custom which has parallels in many primitive and Asian societies; that of the priest, as representative of the God, having rights or duties of sexual initiation linked to an established pattern of marriage. Such a custom, which persisted until recently in parts of Cambodia, probably existed among the Dravidians before their conversion to Hinduism, and the Nambudiris may merely have taken advantage of its presence to extend what was at first a *jus primae noctis* into a pattern of more lasting relationships which helped to protect what the Nambudiris had most in mind, their central institution of primogeniture. Their own explanation, that Parusurama ordained that Sudra (i.e. Nair) women should 'put off chastity' in order to satisfy the desires of the Brahmins is patently an attempt to justify a custom not covered by ordinary Vedic laws, though even in this connection one should remember that Hindu legends allows extraordinary sexual liberties to holy men.

Whatever their origins, the two parallel systems of inheritance and family organization, Marumakkathayam and Makkathayam, together with Sambandham concubinage, were clearly established by the time the historical record begins to become clear during the early 10th century, and they formed an important part of the structure of Hindu society by the time the first European observers arrived.

It was a society dominated sacerdotally by the Brahmins, militarily by the Nairs, with economic power divided between them; beside it, and at peace with it, lived other societies which accepted its political primacy but neither its customs nor its philosophy. These were the peoples of the Book, the Christians, the Jews and the Moslems.

6

The Peoples of the Book

In A.D. 52, St. Thomas—Doubting Thomas of the New Testament—is said to have landed at the Keralan port of Muziris and started his task of conversion. From this date, all Indian Christians believe, their Church began and has continued without interruption. The tradition is supported only by other traditions; there is no contemporary evidence which bears upon the arrival of the first Christian teacher. Yet the traditions are numerous and insistent enough to induce in anyone who examines them a strong subjective tendency towards acceptance.

Thomas, according to the legend, preached the gospel at Muziris with great patience, waiting eight months before he was able to form his first congregation. Then, while living in the Jewish quarter of the city, he is said to have converted the local raja, together with four hundred Hindus and forty Jews. Later he founded seven churches, at Cranganore, Quilon, Parur, Palur and other places on the coast of Kerala where the Christian community is undoubtedly very ancient. Eventually he departed for Madras, and preached on the Coast of Coromandel, until he was slain by hostile Hindus and buried on the site of the present cathedral of Mylapore.

There are certain non-Christian traditions which bear at least obliquely on this account. The Syrian Christians, the members of the church St. Thomas is said to have founded, regard themselves as superior to all other Christians, and base their claim to high social standing on the legend that many of St. Thomas's converts were of high caste—either Nambudiri Brahmins or Nairs; this claim is unexpectedly supported by an anti-Christian tradition of the Brahmins themselves, recorded in the *Keralolpatti*, according to which a certain 'Thoman', who was 'an

opponent of all vedas', came to Malabar and converted 'many prominent people in the land', including the reigning king, Bana Perumal. Jewish traditions in Cochin also support the Christian legend, first by repeating the account of St. Thomas's arrival and secondly by claiming the existence of a Jewish colony at Muziris in the 1st century A.D., though the date they usually give for their own arrival is A.D. 69, some seventeen years after the traditional date of St. Thomas's landing.

These rather fragilely interlocking traditions are all we have; no fragment of tangible evidence supports any of them, though the long-delayed excavation of Cranganore, the site of Muziris, could reveal a great deal about the past of both the Christians and the Jews in Kerala. It is not, in fact, until the end of the 2nd century A.D. that even a scrap of respectably corroborative evidence floats to the surface of history. It is contained in the record of a visit to India in A.D. 193 of the Alexandrian theologian Pantaenus, the teacher of Clement of Alexandria, who found a Christian community in existence and took back with him to Egypt a gospel according to St. Matthew in the Hebrew language. Even the tale of Pantaenus has been criticized; in particular it has been doubted whether he ever reached India proper. But the peculiar knowledgeability with which Clement, his pupil, talked of Brahmins and of the cult of Buddha seems good enough evidence to refute these doubts, and, since Pantaenus must have gone to India by boat from Alexandria, Muziris would have been his first destination. Buddhism flourished there in the 1st century, and Pantaenus could easily have gathered information on this religion to recount on his return to Alexandria, while, since the Jews were undoubtedly in Kerala by this time, it is not impossible that he should have discovered a gospel in Hebrew; his account certainly seems to establish the presence of Christians in Kerala before A.D. 200.

As for the story of St. Thomas itself, it is so ancient and so strongly held by the Indian Christians that it cannot be lightly dismissed, and certain aspects contain at least good circumstantial evidence. The pre-Malabar part of St. Thomas's legend tells how he went to Taxila in north-western India to work as a master

carpenter for the Parthian king Gondophares, whom he converted. The conversion of kings is a convention of hagiographers, and can usually be ignored; the lesser details of a legend are often more significant, and the key detail here is the name of the king. All records of Gondophares except the St. Thomas legend were lost until the late 19th century, and he was dismissed as a figure of legend. Then, in Taxila, coins bearing his name were discovered, and it was established that he must have reigned in that city about A.D. 50, the approximate date of the saint's visit. The Parthians of Taxila, devoted Philhellenes, imported from the Levant many craftsmen who produced in Taxila a debased version of Greek art and architecture and Thomas may well have been one of them. Finally, in Kerala during the 1st century there was a great demand for master carpenters to build the royal palaces financed by the profits of the pepper trade; Thomas's craft would have made him equally welcome there.

The belief in St. Thomas's apostolate to India was already established in the Levant by the 4th century A.D., when both Jerome and Chrysostom referred to it, and was kept so much alive during the Middle Ages that when the new wave of European visitors began to reach South India in the 1290s—Marco Polo on his way home and the Franciscan friar John of Monte Corvino going in the opposite direction on his way to China—they made a point of visiting the supposed site of the saint's martyrdom in Madras.

On such circumstantial evidence the Indian historian, K. M. Pannikar, a non-Christian, has expressed the view that 'it is difficult to deny the truth' of the Syrian Christian account of the conversions by St. Thomas on the Malabar Coast. Even if the evidence for Thomas's actual arrival in Kerala is never likely to be conclusive, it is evident that Christian missionaries did make their way to Kerala not much later than the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., and it is probable that they arrived by a Greek ship sailing from Alexandria to Muziris. Cranganore (Muziris) must therefore in any case have been the point at which Christianity first touched the Malabar Coast.

8. The temple in the palace at Padmanabhapuram. The shiny floor is of a composition blackened with burnt coconut shell; the secret of making such floors has been forgotten

9. Padmanabhapuram. 17th-century sculptures of divine beings

10. A pepper garden in the foothills

The Syrian Church of India emerged into a clear historical light at the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival in Kerala. By then it had grown to such an extent that the Portuguese estimates placed the number of Syrian Christians as high as 200,000, yet the Christians in Kerala had long ceased any effort at proselytization, regarding admission to their Church as a matter of birthright rather than conversion. This means that at some earlier time recruitment was effected on a large scale. It came about by two means—immigration from Persia and Mesopotamia, and local proselytization.

The first group of immigrants came as refugees from the great persecution of Persian Christians which Sapor II began in 339. They arrived at Cranganore in 345, led by a rich merchant named Knayi Thomas, or Thomas of Cana; besides a Persian bishop and several priests, there were 400 laymen, or, as one of the accounts puts it more precisely, 472 families. The ruler of Cranganore gave Thomas of Cana some land on the opposite side of the River Periyar to the city itself, and there he built a church, a bazaar and a settlement. Copper plates recording this settlement were found by the Portuguese in the 16th century, but they were appropriated by the Franciscans, who took them to Portugal, where they disappeared. When Cosmas Indicopleustes arrived in the 6th century, he found the Christians of Kerala under the care of a Persian bishop. Later at least two further groups of colonists came from the Persian Gulf, one in the 8th century, and the other, led by two bishops, Mar Sarisho and Mar Peroz, in the early 9th century. This group settled at Quilon, and in 849 received a grant of privileges, including the right to build a church, from the King of Venad; the grant was recorded on a series of five copper plates, which are preserved in the Syrian Christian Seminary at Kottayam.

These links with Persia and Mesopotamia shaped the liturgy and also the doctrines of the Church in India. Thomas of Cana's venture was blessed and perhaps even instigated by the Bishop of Seleucia, who had already assumed the title of Catholicos of the East. The see of Seleucia was originally subordinate to the Patriarchate of Antioch, but it seceded in 410, and in 424 the

Catholicos assumed the higher title of Patriarch of the East; later he was known as Patriarch of Babylon. In 431, when the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and his heretical teachings on the dual nature of Christ, the Patriarchate of the East refused to accept its findings and shortly afterwards declared its adherence to Nestorianism. This break with the Churches of the West has remained a part of the tradition of Syrian Christianity in India; several Keralan priests told me that they accepted the findings of no Council later than that of Nicaea in 352. Until the 17th century, the loyalty of those Syrian Christians who did not turn to Rome was still to the Patriarch of Babylon, and this meant that, though the majority were simple, semi-literate believers, concerned little with doctrinal points about the nature of Christ, the general tendency of their Church was Nestorian; there is no evidence of disagreement on this point between the bishops who came periodically from Persia or Babylon and the native Indian clergy.

But though Persian and Mesopotamian immigrants gave the Indian Church a Syriac liturgy and a Nestorian doctrine, and maintained the link with the Catholicos of the East which has always seemed particularly important to the Christians of the Malabar Coast, these relatively small numbers of settlers cannot account for the numerous congregations which existed at the end of the 15th century, or for the spread of Syrian Christianity into areas away from the coast which eventually became its great strongholds, such as Kottayam and Kothamangalam, where the churches are undoubtedly very ancient.[1] To account for this great increase in numbers and for the spread of the doctrine through almost all the regions which later became the states of Cochin and Travancore, we have to assume a considerable original recruitment from the local population. Modern Syrian Christians look no different from other Malayalis, and whatever Iranian or Semitic strain may have been brought from

[1] There has never been any real doubt that the Persian crosses preserved in the Valia Palli church at Kottayam date, as the Christians claim, from the early 9th century A.D., and the very handsome church itself, with its steps inscribed in a Malayalam script long obsolete, is undoubtedly almost as old.

outside has been completely submerged in the indigenous Dravidian stock.

As we have seen, Syrian Christians in fact claim to be of high-caste Hindu descent, and this claim is admitted by the status within the caste system which the Brahmins tacitly allowed them. Yet during the past five centuries the only Malayalis who have accepted conversion to Christianity have been very low-caste Hindus, like the fishermen of the Travancore coast who responded to the preaching of St. Francis Xavier and his Jesuit followers. To explain this apparently anomalous situation we have to remember the religious and social fluidity of Kerala before the Brahmins locked it into India's most rigid caste system. Buddhist and Jains preached freely, made converts and enjoyed the protection of kings and noblemen, and there is no reason to assume that Christians were any less favoured. It was evidently during this period of general religious permissiveness, up to the 11th century, that Syrian Christianity was, in India, a proselytizing religion. The names of the Brahmin converts have not been preserved, but at least one important chiefly family of Kshatriya rank, the Rajas of Villarvattam in the Cochin area, accepted Christianity and maintained the religion until their line died out just before the arrival of the Portuguese; the tomb of the last Christian Raja of Villarvattam is still preserved in the ancient church of Udayamperur. The accession of this family to the Syrian Church provides the core of truth in the story, told to Vasco da Gama by the Christians who welcomed him on his second visit to India, that they had once had their own king, whose sceptre they presented to the Portuguese commander. The reputation which the Christians enjoyed as soldiers in the 15th century—the Portuguese recruited many of them for the protection of Fort Cochin—suggests that they also made wide conversions from the Nair caste. At the same time, an 8th century grant of privileges to Iravi Kortan, head of a trading guild and generally thought to have been a Nestorian merchant from Cranganore, shows the Christians already embarking on those commercial and financial activities which, in the absence of a Vaisya caste of merchants and money-lenders in Kerala, became

in later years the peculiar province of the Syrian community, who today virtually control the banking system throughout the state.

Like the smaller Jewish and Moslem communities, the Christian Church survived the great Brahmin revival which virtually destroyed Buddhism and Jainism in Kerala. This fact, at first sight puzzling, seems explicable only in terms of the exclusivism of their doctrines. They were not—like the religions which disappeared—offshoots of Hinduism which retained much of the philosophy and even of the pantheon of the primal Vedic creed, and therefore they were less susceptible either to the emotional appeal of Vaishnative devotionalism or to the social pressures exerted by the Brahmins. At the same time there must have been an advantage from the viewpoint of the categorizing Brahmin mind (which at an earlier date found a classification even for the Greeks as degenerated members of the Sudra caste) in the fact that these were solid self-contained communities which, without friction, could be incorporated into the set structure that society now assumed.

For the Syrian Christians the days of proselytization were over as soon as they accepted this situation; they even underwent a process of Hinduization. Caste rules they applied only slightly less harshly than their Hindu neighbours; a man of a lowly community might be allowed on to the veranda of a Christian home but not into the house itself. They also adopted many Hindu customs. For example, during the Syrian wedding ceremony the Christian bridegroom follows the Nair custom of tying a thread round the bride's neck and giving her a white cloth which he drapes over her head. In the churches of Kerala hang many-wicked bronze coconut lamps very similar to those used in the Hindu temples, and bathing in sacred waters is an important feature of some Christian festivals; when I encountered two Syrian Christian ascetic monks they wore—with the low black pillbox hat of the Christian priest—the orange robe of the Hindu sannyasin, and referred to their hermitages by the Hindu term of ashram.

In general, the Syrian Christians were unmolested by the non-

Christians of Kerala. At a later period Tippu Sultan destroyed some Christian churches in Malabar and made a few forcible conversions to Islam, but he was an alien from Mysore, unaccustomed to Malayali traditions of tolerance. The only known persecution by Hindus was the massacre in 1809 of many Syrian Christians, including some priests, during a Nair rising against the East India Company, but this was less because of the religion of the victims than because they were suspected of favouring the British. There is certainly no record of any persecution, either on the part of the rulers or of the Brahmins, during the period before the arrival of the Portuguese. In fact, all the evidence suggests that Christians were highly respected by their fellow Malayalis —a respect which continues to this day; often Hindus would remark to me on the piety of the Syrian Christians, who went regularly to church while they themselves visited the temples only at the time of special festivals or to ask special favours. The Christians were allowed to bear arms, like the Nairs and the Calicut Moslems, and they were noted for their honour as merchants, and for their abstemiousness; though it was not enjoined by their religion, many of them refrained from eating meat. They allowed their village priests to marry, but their bishops were always drawn from a celibate order. Their congregations were large, and must have been prosperous, for the churches built during the late Middle Ages and still being used in the older centres of Christianity such as Parur, Kothamalgalam and Tripunithura are massive white structures, thick-walled and decorated with ancient mural paintings, which dwarf both the Hindu temples and the synagogues and mosques of the other religions of the Book.

For long periods during the Middle Ages, particularly after the break-up of the Kulasekhara Empire, the Syrian Church in India lived in isolation from Christianity elsewhere. The Patriarchs of the East sent priests and bishops, quite apart from the parties of Christian migrants I have already mentioned, up to the 9th century, and round about 855 the Patriarch Theodosius decreed that Bishops in India should send letters of communion every six years. But the domination of the trade routes by the

Moslems made it difficult to maintain contact and this was the last known communication between Malabar and Mesopotamia until towards the end of the 15th century. The Indian Christians maintained their Syriac liturgy, which few even of their priests continued to understand, and they obviously paid little attention to doctrine, for Kerala, which has produced revolutionary Hindu thinkers—Sankara and Sri Narayana Guru—and at least a few notable Moslem teachers, has never developed an indigenous tradition of Christian theology.

When the link with the Patriarch of Babylon was re-established in the 1480s, it was because, for reasons which are now unknown, the line of apostolic succession in India had broken down, and a deputation asking for Bishops was sent to the Babylonian Patriarch Simon IV. Two Persian monks, Mar John and Mar Thomas, were consecrated bishops and reached Kerala in 1490. Mar Thomas went back ten years later to report to the Patriarch Elias V, the newly elected successor of Simon IV, on the state of the Church in India, and to transmit offerings from the Christians there as a symbol of their renewed spiritual allegiance to the Nestorian Church. In 1503 Elias V ordained a metropolitan, Mar Yahballah, and two new bishops, Mar Denah and Mar Jacob, who returned with Mar Thomas, so that shortly after the first confrontation between Vasco da Gama and the Syrian Christians in 1502 the Church had a full hierarchy of a metropolitan and four bishops. Whether the news of the arrival of the Catholic Portuguese in 1498 was one of the reasons for the return of Mar Thomas to seek reinforcements in Chaldaea is not known, but it is possible.

That the Roman Catholic Church had long viewed the Christians of India as potential recruits is certain. The first Catholic priest known to have reached Kerala was John of Monte Corvino, whose visit took place in 1294, within a short time of that of Marco Polo. He stayed on the Malabar Coast for several months, on his way to China, and baptized a number of people into the Catholic faith. No doubt his converts lapsed, for it was only a generation later that the first serious attempt was made to infiltrate the preserves of the Nestorians. In 1324 the Dominican,

Father Jordanus, made his way by the trade routes to India. He arrived first at one of the ports of Gujerat, and reported finding a Christian church as far north as Surat. However, it did not take him long to reach the Malabar Coast, and to select this as the most promising field for proselytization in the whole of India. Father Jordanus returned to Rome, and there, in 1329, Pope John XXII constituted Quilon the first Roman Catholic episcopal see in India, and consecrated Father Jordanus as the first bishop. The Pope regarded the Syrian Christians as erring sons of his own Church, and provided Jordanus with a Bull calling on them to abandon their 'schisms'. This was the first recorded claim of the Pope of Rome to jurisdiction over the Syrian Church in Kerala. Its immediate results were not impressive. Father Jordanus returned and established himself at Quilon in 1330. The native Christians were friendly, and Jordanus founded a church of the Latin rite and gathered together a small congregation. The opposition he encountered came, not from the Malayalis, but from the Arab traders, who left the Syrian Christians in peace, but molested those who accepted the Latin rite, and killed some of them. Nevertheless, the single church Jordanus founded was still in a flourishing condition when the Florentine friar, John of Marignolli, arrived there in 1338. Friar John stayed in Quilon for a year, preaching regularly and decorating the church with mural paintings. But the paintings and the church and the very memory of its site have all vanished from Quilon. This earliest Roman Catholic communion appears in fact to have died out shortly after John of Marignolli's departure. When Roman Catholicism returned to the Malabar Coast more than a century and a half later it was supported by the military power and the religious fanaticism of the Portuguese. And it plunged the native Church into a series of encounters with fellow Christians, first Portuguese and then English, which created far more trouble and bitterness for them than any of their relations with non-Christian Indians up to the time, in 1502, when they naïvely placed themselves under the equivocal protection of Vasco da Gama.

The smallest of the religious communities of Kerala is that of the Cochin Jews. Today it is close to extinction; many Jews have left for the larger cities of India, particularly Bombay, and many more have departed to Israel. As late as 1941, when the community was already—according to my Jewish informants—considerably reduced, there were still 1,500 Jews in the Cochin district, but now there are only 300. Even so, they have remained a distinctive and historically interesting people, and their most important meeting place, the Paradesi Synagogue at Mattancherri on the Cochin backwaters, is not only one of the most beautiful buildings in Kerala, but also the centre of a whole cluster of nostalgically held traditions. The original settlement of the Jews, like that of the Christians, was at Muziris or Cranganore, which they abandoned in 1567 for the Cochin area where, until recently, there were five settlements, at Mattancherri, Ernakulam, Parur, Mala and Chennamangalam; since the last war those in Mala and Chennamangalam have disappeared entirely owing to the emigration to Israel, and in the others there are only four synagogues which can muster the minimum congregations of ten adult males.

The community at Mattancherri inhabits the quarter known as Jewtown, a single street and a few narrow courts huddling around the Paradesi synagogue; many of its members are prosperous enough to own large houses, dating from the Dutch occupation, in Fort Cochin, but they keep establishments in the old ghetto to which they always return at times of festival. These are the so-called White Jews, of whom there are now only 87. They belong to the Sephardic division of Jewry, and their pronunciation of Hebrew, which they use only ceremonially, is incomprehensible to an Ashkenazi Jew. They do not know Yiddish, and they normally speak either English or a Malayalam dialect of their own, so thickly studded with Portuguese, Dutch and English words that the ordinary Keralans cannot understand them. They have no rabbis; their services are conducted entirely by the elders, who also manage the internal affairs of the community. Within the synagogue segregation is stricter than among Jews in the West; the women sit in a gallery with a screen that

makes them invisible from below, and quite recently a woman from the Bene Israel of Bombay caused a small scandal by sitting in the body of the synagogue. Their weddings, at which the brides wear magnificent marriage sarongs heavy with gold embroidery, are among the most elaborate in Kerala, lasting for seven days of ceremonials and lavish feasting to which hundreds of people of all creeds are invited. This willingness to share their ceremonies with others is particularly noticeable among the Cochin Jews, who often invite gentile strangers to join their Sabbath meals; it is probably due to the tolerance which they have enjoyed in Kerala for the greater part of their many centuries of residence.

In the other surviving Jewish communities of Kerala, the majority are Black Jews. The division between the two groups is almost as sharp as that between Hindu castes. It is symbolized by the Jewish cemetery at Mattancherri, which is divided by a high wall; on one side lie the White Jews and on the other the Black. In life they are as divided as in death; marriage never takes place between them, and when members of the tiny White Jewish community seek to break their own close circle of inbreeding they usually find brides or bridegrooms for their children among the Bene Israel, whom they consider their equals. Even at first sight the difference between the two Cochin communities is obvious. The White Jews are tall and fair-skinned; many of the men have red hair and beards. Except for their festivals, they dress entirely in the Western manner. The Black Jews resemble their Malayali neighbours so closely in colouring and features that it is difficult to tell them apart, particularly as the men wear the Keralan mundu and the women the customary wrap-over skirt or, more rarely, the sari.

The origins of the Black Jews are by far the more obscure. They were certainly at Cranganore in the 12th century, when a travelling co-religionist mentioned meeting Jews who were 'black in colour', and their own traditions claim that they were the first Jews in Kerala, arriving from Yemen and Babylon long before the Christian era; on the time of this exodus there is confusion even among themselves, some claiming that they are

descended from Jews captured by Shalmaneser IV in the 8th century, and others that they came after the Babylonian captivity. They explain their dark colouring as an acquired characteristic resulting from many centuries of life in the tropics.

Their story is improbable, biologically and historically, and there seems more truth in the contention of the White Jews that the ancestors of the Black Jews were Malayali serfs whom they converted and then liberated, without, however, extending the link much beyond co-religionism. The principal reason for the sustained and almost complete separation between the two groups can be found in the pervading influence of the Keralan caste system. White Jews, like Syrian Christians, were accepted at a high level in relation to the Hindu hierarchy, and any close mingling with low-class converts would have harmed their social standing.

Even after they first appear in reliable chronicles, the Black Jews play an obscure role, and the known history of the Jewish people in Kerala is mainly that of the White Jews, whose tradition is that they arrived in Kerala in A.D. 69 or 70, having fled from Judaea after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans at the orders of Titus. Christian traditions, as we have seen, associate them with the arrival of St. Thomas, who is supposed to have come in A.D. 52 but this discrepancy could be reconciled by assuming either—as is likely—that Jewish merchants reached Kerala via Alexandria before the migration from Judaea, or that the legend of St. Thomas refers to some unnamed Christian teacher who arrived later in the 1st century.

The Cochin tradition further claims that the first migration of Jews consisted of ten thousand people, who settled in Cranganore and three other places in the vicinity. The Dutch Jew, Moses de Paiva, who visited Cochin in 1686, reported in his *Noticias dos Judeos de Cochin* that another enormous contingent of between 70,000 and 80,000 arrived in A.D. 370 in addition to a third large group which, according to an independent Cochin tradition, arrived at the end of the 5th century, fleeing from persecution in Babylon and Persia. The figures given in these traditions are obviously exaggerated, but small groups probably did arrive at

intervals from the Middle East to enjoy the tolerance offered by the Hindu rulers of Kerala, paralleling the process of recruitment from Persia and Babylon recorded in the traditions of the Syrian Christians. The reputation which Kerala gained among Jews as a place of refuge is shown by the fact that after their expulsion from Spain in 1492 at least two groups of exiles from that country are known to have settled on the Malabar Coast.

The earliest document bearing on the history of the Jewish community is the pair of copper plates, now in the possession of the Paradesi synagogue, which record a grant to the leader of the Jews, Joseph Rabban, of chiefly rights over the village of Anjuvannam, the Jewish quarter of Cranganore. The Cochin Jews claim that the grant was made in A.D. 379, but the names of the signatories show that it was really made at the end of the 10th century. The grant is interesting as an example of the Chera royal style and important as an indication of the privileges that went with chieftainship in ancient Kerala. This is the translation generally favoured by the Jews:

Hail and Prosperity! The following gift was graciously made by him who has assumed the title of King of Kings! His Majesty the King Sri Parkaran Iravi Varman, whose ancestors have been wielding the sceptre for many hundred thousand years, on the thirty-sixth year after the second year, on the day on which he stayed in Muyiricote, was pleased to make the following gift. We have granted to Joseph Rabban the village of Anjuvannam together with seventy-two proprietary rights, tolls on boats and carts, the revenue and the title of Anjuvannam, the lamp of the day, a cloth spread in front to walk on, a palanquin, a parasol, a vaduga drum, a trumpet, a gateway, a garland, decoration with festoons, and so forth. We have granted him the land tax and weight tax: moreover we have sanctioned by these copper plates that he need not pay the dues which the inhabitants of the other cities pay the Royal palace, and that he may enjoy the benefits which they enjoy. To Joseph Rabban Prince of Anjuvannam and to his descendants, sons and daughters, and to his nephews, and to the

sons-in-law who marry his daughters in natural succession, so long as the world and moon exist. Anjuvannam shall be his hereditary possession. Hail!

With the knowledge of

Govarthandan Marthandan, Chief of Venadu
Kodai Chirikandan, Chief of Vanepalinadu
Manavea Mahavin, Chief of Eralanadu
Irairan Chattan, Chief of Vallanadu
Kodai Iravi, Chief of Nedumpurayunadu
Moorkan Chathan, Sub-Commander of the Army
Valdalacheri Kanda, Chief Minister
Written by Kellapan

The German missionary, Gundert, who compiled the standard Malayalam-English dictionary, prepared a translation of the copper plates which differs in some minor details and a major one from the Jewish translation. The significant difference is in the name of the king, which Gundert translated as Bhaskara Ravi Varman. Since that time Bhaskara Ravi Varman has become known through temple inscriptions. He was the first king of that name, who was killed during the Chola wars and who began to reign in 962. One of the witnesses, Govardhana Martanda, lord of Venad, is known in the same way; he assumed power in 976. The grant to Joseph Rabban cannot therefore have been made before the last quarter of the 10th century.

The copper plates show the Jewish leader receiving concessions of a kind that would normally have been made only to the highest of Nair chieftains. The right to erect a roofed gate at the entrance to the family compound was one of these, while the right to be shaded by a parasol or state umbrella was even more exceptional, being granted only to the great regional chiefs who acted as viceroys. Such privileges, together with exemptions

from some taxes and the right to levy others, make it clear that the Jews were actually being granted a pocket principality. The occasion was obviously considered important, since the grant was not merely made by the Chera king in durbar at Cranganore (Muyiricote or Muziris), but was witnessed by leading civil and military officials and by five of the great feudal magnates of Kerala, the rulers—to translate their titles into modern form—of Venad, Kottayam, Ernad (or Calicut), Valavunad and Palghat, who presumably had concurred beforehand in the royal council.

The implications of Bhaskara Ravi Varman's grant are that by the end of the 10th century the Jews were not merely new arrivals receiving a piece of land out of the king's generosity, but a people who had given services to the state and who must therefore be rewarded by the raising of their leader to a level in rank with the most important native chieftains. Whether the services were financial or military or both we have no means of knowing, though in later centuries Jewish soldiers certainly served some of the local rajas. For five centuries, and even after the Chera empire itself came to an end, the rights of the Jews in Cranganore were still respected by the local kings of the region. The principality of Anjuvannam was not to survive 'so long as world and moon exist', but it did at least outlive the line of Joseph Rabban.

The Jews called their little principality Cyngalin or Shingly, and its fame spread widely among their people in other lands. There is a tradition that in the 12th century the great poet and philosopher Jehudah Halevi went to Cranganore, and it is certain that in the 14th century another poet, Rabbi Nissim, celebrated his visit in verse.

I travelled from Spain.
I had heard of the city of Shingly.
I longed to see a Jewish king.
Him I saw with my own eyes.

During the Middle Ages many foreigners encountered the Jews of the Malabar Coast. Arab travellers mentioned them in the 9th century. Marco Polo saw Jews as well as Christians in

Quilon. Ibn Batuta, travelling in 1342, visited the Jewish settlement of Chennamangalam, where he found an Emir who paid tribute to the King of Quilon, the great Ravi Varma's heir who still retained his predecessor's conquests in central Kerala.

Everything we know suggests that through the Middle Ages the Jews lived a prosperous and undisturbed life in their tiny principality of Anjuvannam and in the outlying settlements scattered along the coast as far south as Quilon. It was at the end of the 15th century that their troubles began, at first through their own quarrelsomeness. The dynasty of the Rabbans died out during this century, and its extinction was followed by bitter dissensions. First there was a revolt of the Black Jews against the White Jews, whom they accused of oppressing them. Then, after it had been agreed that the chieftainship should go to one of the noble families, the two brothers who were candidates quarrelled in 1471 as to who should be granted the title. The younger recruited the Black Jews on his side, and fought the White Jews who supported the elder. The neighbouring Hindu princes intervened to re-establish peace, and, deciding that the grant to Joseph Rabban had lapsed with the death of the last of his line, abolished the principality.

Many of the Jews who were directly involved in these disturbances took refuge in the territories of the Raja of Cochin. A considerable community, however, remained in Cranganore and, though they had lost political independence, they prospered on the pepper trade, which was booming as a result of the competition between the Portuguese and the merchants from Egypt and Arabia. Eventually, however, a rather obscure dispute broke out with the Moslem merchants, who claimed that the Jews were ruining their trade by spreading rumours that they had been adulterating pepper. A Moslem was killed in the quarrel, and his companions called on the Arabs in the rest of Kerala for assistance. According to the Moslem history *Tofutal Mujahideen*,

> . . . [the Moslems] embarked their fleet, which consisted of a hundred sail, and commenced hostilities against Cranganore, where they put to death a great number of the Jews and drove

out the rest to a village in the neighbourhood of Cranganore that lies to the eastward of it. The Moslems burnt their houses and synagogues and proceeded to destroy the houses and churches of the Christians of that place, upon which a misunderstanding took place between the Moslems and the Nairs living there, and several of the latter were slain; in consequence of which the Moslems who dwelt in Cranganore were compelled to seek safety elsewhere and to remove to other towns.

The Jews of Cochin have ever since compared this disaster with the destruction of Jerusalem. The devastation was so complete that, apart from a few tombstones, the only known relics of Anjuvannam are place-names—the Hill of the Jews and the Jews' Tank. The survivors crept back to live an impoverished life in the ruins of their town. They were prevented from making any serious effort at rebuilding it by the Portuguese, who as persecutors were even more persistent than the Arabs, mainly because of the presence of refugee Jews from their own country to whom they begrudged even this distant asylum; even before the Arab attack on Cranganore, Affonso de Albuquerque, the greatest of the Portuguese governors of the Malabar Coast and also a man full of the faults of his age, had reported the presence of these unlucky exiles to the King of Portugal and suggested that he might be allowed to kill those he encountered.

Eventually the Jews emigrated from Cranganore and placed themselves under the protection of the Raja of Cochin, who not only welcomed them with a kindness that contrasted dramatically with the treatment they had recently been receiving from Moslems and Christians, but even gave them land next to his palace to build a new community. Here, in 1567, Jewtown was built, and the Paradesi synagogue in 1568, where it stands to this day, on a piece of ground symbolically divided only by a low wall from the Hindu temple in the grounds of the raja's palace. When Manasseh ben Israel petitioned Cromwell to allow the Jews to re-enter England, he quoted the generosity of the kings of Cochin.

Even here the Jews were not entirely immune from Portuguese persecutions, and when the Dutch first captured Cochin in 1661 they naturally but unwisely welcomed them; the result was the sacking of Jewtown by the returning Portuguese in 1662, and the burning of the synagogue. The Dutch finally expelled the Portuguese in 1663, and from that time the Cochin Jews lived in peace. Moses de Paiva on his visit in 1686 found ten synagogues in operation, four in Cochin and six in outlying towns, and a population of Jews which, despite persecutions, must have been at least ten times as great as it is today.

Under the friendly rule of the Dutch, who employed them often as agents, the Cochin Jews enjoyed a second period of active and prosperous participation in the commerce of the Malabar Coast, which continued until the age of the sailing ship came to an end. Their boats sailed everywhere in Asian waters from the Red Sea to Canton, whence Ezechiel Rahabi brought back the blue and white tiles which contribute so much to the beauty of the Paradesi synagogue. The Rahabi family during this period attained a position in the Jewish community and in the confidence of the rulers of Kerala almost equivalent to that of the Rabbans in the Middle Ages. They were Syrian Jews who came from Aleppo in 1646, and quickly fitted into the world of intrigue that surrounded the native princes and the Dutch officials. Their gifts ran to diplomacy, and on at least two important occasions they used these talents to effect. In 1690 David Rahabi persuaded the Dutch to intervene decisively in one of the succession disputes for the throne of Cochin, and, on a more dramatic occasion in 1766, when Hyder Ali's forces were approaching Cochin from the north, it was Ezechiel Rahabi who successfully negotiated on behalf of the Raja the tribute which would induce the Moslem ruler to halt his march.

But the Rahabis of the 17th and 18th centuries were the last Jews who played a dramatic part in the history of Kerala. During the 19th century trade began to fall out of the community's hands, and today they are no longer among the leading merchants of Cochin, while socially they have tended to turn inward to their own concerns. They were too few to play any

11. Trichur: one of the four gates to Fort

12. Tripunithura: the deserted palace of the Maharajas of Cochin

13. Wynad:
a headman of the
Paniyar tribe

14. Two gentlemen of Ernakulam: a member of the Cochin royal family and his Nair brother-in-law at the deserted palace of Tripunithura

significant part in the democratic politics that began to develop in Kerala at the end of the Victorian era, and too internationally minded to become passionately involved in the movement for Indian independence; in fact, many of them today regret the departure of the British. With the founding of the state of Israel a new vision came into their lives, and even the minority who for various reasons have remained in Cochin seem like people already in transit between two worlds.

Each winter in Kerala thousands of young Hindus grow rich black beards, and then, dressed in equally black robes and bearing burdens on their heads, they set out shouting from the cities on their pilgrimage to the forest temple of the god Aiyappan high in the Western Ghats. A generation ago the pilgrimage involved days of walking on jungle paths, and the pilgrims would camp on the sandbanks of the riverbeds, practising a comradeship among strangers which added to the merit of the journey. Now the festival of the dionysiac Aiyappan has become so commercialized that it is announced by fulsome advertisements in the newspapers. One which I collected ran thus:

> Lakhs of devotees sound and resound the hymn of praise. In an air of sanctity, the fragrance of fervour. The beauty of piety. The transcendant wonder of faith in the forests. Dedicated pilgrims, black-robed and bearded. On their way into the Sabari Hills. With offerings to Lord Ayyapa.
>
> Experience the inner glow, the unworldliness of supplicants! Let your light shine in this year's Sabari Malai Festival!

In keeping with the new spirit, the unworldly supplicants go in buses by new mountain roads and take a relatively easy stroll to the temple through woods from which wild animals and snakes are scared by the vast numbers—600,000 in 1965—who tramp with Malayali noisiness through the solitudes.

Yet the feast of Aiyappan is still interesting to the historian not only as the survival of a Dravidian cult originating long before the arrival of the Brahmins, but also because of the curious

links between this ancient cult and the Islamic religion. Aiyappan, in his incarnation as the son of the Raja of Pandalam, is the hero who fulfils a task set by his jealous mother-in-law when he rides a tiger out of the jungle and milks it to cure her of a pretended illness. Afterwards Aiyappan reveals his divine identity, and returns to the forest, where he encounters a Moslem hero named Vavar; they fight a noisy but indecisive battle, and then swear eternal friendship. In commemoration of this legendary pact, even to this day a Moslem mullah plays a part in the Hindu festival of Aiyappan, and he has the power—rarely if ever exercised—to decide whether a pilgrim is approaching the god with sufficient purity of heart. So, year after year, he fulfils the role of Vavar, the Moslem friend of the Nair god Aiyappan. This extraordinary linking of two creeds in legend and festival shows not only the antiquity of Islam in Kerala, but also the difference in the relationship between Islam and Hinduism on the Malabar Coast from that which exists in North India.

Into the North the Moslems came riding out of Central Asia as predators and fanatical iconoclasts, destroying the clumsy armies which the Rajput kings led against them, on occasion carrying out vast massacres of infidels, and ruling as tyrants from the seven cities of Delhi. They aroused a resentment that burst forth in the resistance of the Mahrattas and the Sikhs to the Moghul rulers, and led with tragic inevitability to the breaking away of Pakistan and the great communal massacres of 1947.

Malayalis of all religions observed the violence of 1947 with astonishment and horror. A Trivandrum professor who was studying in North India at the time told me how he and his fellow Nairs at the university stood guard over Keralan Moslem students to protect them from violence. 'After all,' he remarked, 'we hated our own Moslems far less than we hated North Indians.' His remark revealed not only the tensions that exist between the North and the South in India, but also the degree of mutual tolerance that has lasted in Kerala for more than a thousand years, broken only by the temporary incursion of Moslems from the violent North during the 18th century invasions of Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan. The other side of the

same medal is shown by the attitude of Malayali Moslems to Pakistan. Those who have gone there, as I found when I met some of them in Karachi, have felt suffocated by its atmosphere of fanatical anti-Hinduism, and most have stayed at home because to them the past that divided North India had no meaning. Islam came to Kerala long before it reached other parts of India, and it came peacefully, carried by the sails of trading ships.

The arrival of Islam, like that of Christianity, is not recorded, and here again tradition must take the place of history. But, since traders from Arabia were sailing to the Malabar Coast throughout the period when Mohammed was carrying out his great conversions, one can assume that Moslems were living there as merchants no later than the middle of the 7th century. The first Moslem date was found in the ancient seaport of Pantalayini Kollam in Malabar, which was used by the Greeks and mentioned by Pliny as Patake. In the Moslem cemetery of Pantalayini Kollam stands the tomb of Ali Ibn Udthorman who 'was obliged to leave this world for ever in the year 166 of the Hegira so called after Mohammed the Prophet left Mecca for Medina'. This gives a date of A.D. 788, but is is clearly not a beginning date, since by this time the Moslems had established themselves in sufficient numbers to create their own cemetery.

Like the Christians and Jews of Kerala, the Moslems believe Cranganore to have been the first place where their religion was taught. According to the tradition preserved in the *Tofutal Mujahideen*, proselytization began very soon after the death of the Prophet; a group of twenty Moslems, led by Malik Ibn Dinar, arrived in 643 with the intent of preaching the true religion. They were welcomed by the local ruler, and in Cranganore they founded the first mosque in Kerala. But Cranganore, with all the history that loads its name, is now the least impressive of ancient sites, and though a mosque still stands where Malik Ibn Dinar's is said to have been built, it is a plain structure, without minaret or dome, built in the gabled style which the local Moslems have adapted from the basic form of the Keralan Hindu temple, and it gives no impression of great antiquity.

After the conversions at Cranganore, Malik Ibn Dinar's party divided, one half going northward along the coast and the other southward; between them they founded ten more mosques in places which have remained important Moslem centres, including Pantalayini Kollam. Whether Malik Ibn Dinar's primary intent was the conversion of Malayalis or the establishment of mosques for the use of the Arab traders and their employees is not clear from the traditional account, but it seems most likely, whether we accept his tradition or not, that organized Islamic worship was first established in the merchant communities. Many of the Arabs frequenting the Malabar Coast took native women as wives or concubines, and the offspring of these unions were among the first Moplahs or Mapillas, as the native Moslems are called. The actual conversions were mainly among the lower castes. The Moslems do not claim, as the Christians have done, that Brahmins were among their proselytes, but they sustain the legend that the famous but unidentifiable Cheraman Perumal became a Moslem and died in Mecca.

This legend may have its foundation in the fact that one Hindu princely family, at Arrakal near Cannanore, was actually converted, and its members became the Ali Rajas, the only Moslem princes in Kerala. There are conflicting traditions as to how this conversion took place; the more plausible tells that a daughter of one of the Kolathiri Rajas of Cannanore defied her family, married a Nair of a lower sub-caste, and then embraced Islam to avoid excommunication, after which the Kolathiri granted her the principality where her descendants afterwards reigned. When the first Europeans arrived the Ali Rajas were established as Moslem rajas feudatory to the rulers of Cannanore, their domain including the Laccadive Islands. Their Nair ancestry was shown by the fact that the title descended matrilineally until the Ali Rajas sealed the fate of their dynasty in the 18th century by concluding a suicidal alliance with Hyder Ali.

During the second Chera empire Moslems resided in every port of Kerala from Cannanore to Quilon. The coins of 8th-century Omayyad Caliphs have been found even in inland towns such as the old Christian centre of Kothamangalam, and

in the 9th and 19th centuries Arab chroniclers like Ibn Khurdadbeh and Ibn Hankal spoke of the great trade of the cities of Malabar, and of the mosques where the merchants offered prayer.

By the 13th century most of the commerce with Arabia and Moslem Egypt was already concentrated in the northern ports of Cannanore and Calicut, owing to the fact that the Zamorin, after having fought his way to the coast in the 11th century, gave special privileges to the Arab merchants who settled in his new port city of Calicut. When Ibn Batuta reached Kerala in the early 14th century the Arab community was well established and prosperous. 'The greater part of the Moslem merchants of this place are so wealthy that any one of them can buy the whole cargo of such vessels as put in here and fit up others like them.' They came not only from Arabia and Egypt, but also from Zanzibar and Ethiopia and even Tunis. They controlled the business of Calicut so thoroughly that the Zamorin's overseer who valued cargoes was a Moslem and the activities of the market were determined by their religious customs. The Chinese Ma Huan who visited Kerala in the fleet of the Imperial admiral Cheng Ho, observed:

> Many of the king's subjects are Moslems, and there are twenty or thirty mosques in the kingdom to which the people resort every seventh day for worship. On this day, during the morning, the people being at the mosques, no business whatever is transacted; and during the latter part of the day, when the services are over, business is resumed.

Relations between Hindus and Moslems in Calicut were marked by an extraordinary mutual trust. The Persian envoy Abdur Razzak, who arrived in 1443 and found that many expensively dressed Moslems were residents of the town, reported that 'security and justice are so firmly established in the city, that the most wealthy merchants bring hither considerable cargoes which they unload and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking in the meantime of any necessity of checking the account or of keeping watch over the goods'. Zeenudin, the author of the *Tofutal Mujahideen*, made it quite

clear that the Arab merchants never allowed religious fanaticism to spoil the smoothness of their relations with the Zamorin and his Nairs. 'The Moslems of Malabar lived in great comfort and tranquillity in consequence of their abstaining from exercising any oppression as well as from the consideration which they invariably evinced for the ancient usages of Malabar.'

Though the Moslems attempted no political domination of the principalities with which they traded, showing in this way a marked difference from the Portuguese traders who followed them, they still played a political role. The Zamorin was their friend, and it was in their interests to increase his power, since this would not only ensure their own trade, but would also increase the territory on which they could draw for the products of the Malabar spice gardens. They therefore encouraged him in his campaigns against neighbouring rajas, and provided him with money and soldiers equipped with modern arms to fight them. In Calicut the Moslems, like the Nairs, were allowed to bear arms, and the Zamorin was able to call out the Moplah levies to fight beside the Nairs in times of emergency. For naval operations he depended almost entirely on the Arabs who had better ships and ordnance than the Malayalis and were much more experienced sailors; his hereditary admirals, the Kunjalis, were Moslems. The domination which the Zamorin had established over most of northern Kerala by the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498 was due largely to the support given him by his Moslem allies.

Like the Christians, though in different ways, the Moslems were to suffer greatly from the arrival of the Portuguese, and much of the violence that mars Keralan history in the 16th and 17th centuries is attributable to the irreconcilable hatred between the Catholics from the Iberian peninsula and 'the Moors', as the Portuguese insisted on calling their rivals, identifying these Arabian traders with the enemies whom they had fought so long and bitterly to liberate their own land. In their turn, the Moslems resisted the Portuguese passionately, since their lives as well as their livings were at stake, and they encouraged the Malayalis also to resist; so that the presence of adherents of Islam on the

Malabar Coast was to have an influence on Keralan history far out of proportion to their numbers.

For at this period the Moslems did not form a large proportion of the population of Kerala, as they do today. They lived only on the coast, in the towns where some kind of maritime trade was carried on, and, even for the purposes of trade, they do not appear to have penetrated far inland. The large-scale conversion of the farming population in the Keralan interior belonged to a later period. According to their own historians, even in Calicut they amounted to less than a tenth of the population, and among those the number of Malayali Moslems was relatively small. Yet almost all the foreign trade was in their hands. Avoiding the temptation to follow the example of the North Indian Moslems by making themselves kings, they had succeeded in becoming the merchant princes of the Malabar Coast.

PART III

TRADERS AND INVADERS

7

The Cross and the Sword

On the 27th May 1498, Vasco da Gama stepped ashore on the coast of Malabar, and for Kerala a new era began, an era lasting four and a half centuries, in which its life was linked by chains of commerce and politics with the shifting patterns of power on the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. Vasco da Gama, more than most men whose names seem large in history, was an instrument of forces largely beyond his own control or even comprehension. He was not a man of genius or even of great original enterprise. It was his good fortune to be picked out from the obscurity of a courtier's life to lead an expedition which others had planned completely. Bartolomeo Dias had found the way round the Cape of Good Hope and had supervised the building of the two ships for the Indian expedition, and when da Gama set out he not only found guides to take him from Africa on long-known trade routes over the Indian Ocean, but he went provided with knowledge of India accumulated by the many European travellers who by the middle of the 15th century had found their way as solitary voyagers to the ports of Malabar.

Since Venice had a live interest in the Far East, it is not surprising that most of these travellers were Italians. Many went by the old Greek routes across the Arabian Sea from Aden; some wandered down the coast from Gujerat, though the Konkani pirates made this a risky undertaking as they had done a millennium before; one at least, Marco Polo, visited Kerala coming from east to west after his great travels in Central Asia and China. For these first comers there was no question of fitting out expeditions; they sailed by whatever Arab or native craft would carry them, and in self-protection they travelled unostenta-

tiously. Some went to convert souls and others to spy out markets, while a few, even in those early days, were impelled by the consuming curiosity of the born traveller. For the number of those who left some kind of account of their journeys, there were probably many more whose names and whose accumulated observations have vanished.

The knowledge which these enterprising Italian travellers gathered was, in a real sense, peripheral, since they told only of the coastline and the towns; none wrote of the hinterland of Kerala, and few of them went far out of sight of the sea. In modern terms their accounts seem spare and arid. They rarely tell of the personal adventures, the sharp momentary impressions by which a modern travel writer gives movement and depth to his narrative. Yet for their contemporaries all they said of that new world beyond the Arabian Sea must have been absorbingly interesting. Some, who gave themselves time to linger, were able to write the first accounts of social customs, such as Friar Jordanus's remarks on the matrilineal system of the Nairs and on jenmi land-ownership. They mingled impossibilities, like Nicholas Conti's tales of sea-monsters shaped exactly like men who lit fires at night to lure fish into their grasp and Marco Polo's statement that the water in Keralan rivers was hot enough to boil an egg, with passages that catch all the real wonder of an utterly strange land. For all he had seen in China, Marco Polo was struck, as modern travellers are, by the sheer peculiarity of the Malabar Coast.

> Everything there is different from what it is with us and excels both in size and beauty. They have no fruit the same as ours, no beast, no bird. This is a consequence of the extreme heat. They have no grain excepting only rice. They make wine out of sugar, and a very good drink it is, and makes a man drunk sooner than grape wine. All that a human body needs for its living is to be had in profusion and very cheap with the one exception of grain other than rice. They have no lack of skilled astrologers. They have physicians who are adept at preserving the human body in health. They are all black-skinned and go stark naked, both males and females,

except for gay loin-cloths. They regard no form of lechery or sensual indulgence as sin.

But it is not only a hedonist's paradise that the Italian travellers present. They tell of the rich Moslem merchants, of the Malayali Christians, unexpected brothers in spirit in such an alien land, of cities and busy ports. Nicholas Conti recorded that already, in 1440, Cochin was a city five miles in circumference (not an unlikely size considering the traditionally loose form of Keralan towns) and he also remarked wryly, 'China was a good place to make money in and Cochin to spend it,' though he never told what the attractions were that drew the gold so easily out of a man's purse. Calicut he found to be 'a maritime city eight miles in circumference, a notable emporium for all India'. Among all the Italians there was even one Russian, Athanasius Niketan, who arrived in Calicut in 1470, evidently somewhat shaken by his voyage. 'Calicut', he said, 'is a port for the whole Indian sea, which God forbid any craft to cross, and whoever saw it will not go over it healthy. The country produces pepper, ginger, dye-plants, muscat, cloves, cinnamon, aromatic roots and every description of spices, and everything is cheap, and servants are very good.'

Almost all of the travellers devoted much of their accounts to listing commodities, dazzled as they were by the abundance of exotic products which in Renaissance Europe were rare and expensive. Marco Polo described how pepper was grown and how indigo was extracted, and gave the first description of calico, the cloth named from Calicut: 'buckrams are made here of the loveliest and most delicate texture in the world'. He also described the goods imported by the Moslem merchants in exchange for Keralan spices. 'They load their ships with brass, which they use as ballast, cloth of gold and silk, sendal, gold, silver, cloves, spikenard and other such spices as are not produced here.' Still, as in Greek times, it was solid cash and items of luxury that the Malayalis preferred to import; the needs of ordinary living, in those days before the land became overcrowded, were usually easily satisfied.

Nowhere did these accounts arouse more interest than in

Portugal, where the extraordinary man, Prince Henry the Navigator, was already, fifty years before Vasco da Gama sailed from Belem, planning the series of voyages that would eventually lead the Portuguese to Asia. It is hard to disentangle the various motives that led Portugal on its imperialistic maritime ventures. The desire of a small nation to gain prestige and power, and particularly not to be overshadowed by neighbouring Spain, was undoubtedly important, as was the audacious commercial idea of gaining control of the shores of India, and later of Malaya and the Indonesian archipelago, in order to usurp the virtual monopoly of the oriental spice trade to Europe on which Venice had grown rich. 'Whoever holds Malacca had his hand on the throat of Venice,' said one Portuguese early in the 16th century, but the control of the Malabar Coast was the first step towards the control of Malacca and towards the building up of that network of fleets and fortresses by which Portugal held the trade of the East to ransom for more than a century.

Yet it was neither accident nor cynicism that led Vasco da Gama to sail to Calicut with the banner of the Cross flying from his masthead. The very justification on which the Portuguese supported their enterprise was embodied in the Bulls they had obtained from successive Popes granting them rights over all the territories discovered in Asia and Africa. They sincerely believed it their duty to find new lands to be proselytized for the Roman Church, and this sense of being entrusted with a special mission, of being in their own way as much the representatives of God as any Brahmin, explains a great deal in their conduct on the Malabar Coast that might otherwise be dismissed as incomprehensible arrogance. But to explain attitudes is not to justify actions, and the record of Portugal in Asia, and on the Malabar Coast in particular, contains much that no system of morality could excuse.

The first Portuguese contact with the Malabar Coast was made by the ancient Red Sea route some years before Vasco da Gama sailed from Belem. In 1487 Joao II sent one of his noblemen, Joao Peres de Covilhao, on a mission of reconnaissance. Covilhao knew Arabic sufficiently well to pass as a Moslem; in

disguise he travelled to Aden, and thence sailed on an Arab ship to the Malabar Coast, where he stayed undetected for several months in Calicut and Cannanore. On his return journey he came by way of Abyssinia, but there he died before his story could be told to the king who had sent him. Nevertheless, the Portuguese went ahead with their plans for an expedition around the Cape of Good Hope, and in July 1497, Vasco da Gama sailed from Portugal.

Almost eleven months later his small fleet made its first Indian landfall near Cannanore, and sailed down the coast to anchor at Kappad, a few miles north of Calicut, whence the Malayali pilots, on the Zamorin's instructions, guided the Portuguese ships into the sheltered harbour of Pantalayini Kollam. To the Malayalis these strange craft and their stranger passengers were objects of wonder, but the Arab merchants, who had close trading links with the Mediterranean, were hostilely aware of the identity of the newcomers, and when, as they awaited an audience with the Zamorin, the Portuguese tried to open trade, they encountered a disconcerting lack of interest in the goods they offered.

Eventually, after a dignified delay, the Zamorin received Vasco da Gama in ceremonial durbar, with his ministers and chieftains around him. Defying the humid Malabar heat, da Gama dressed elaborately in blue satin and velvet, and a brocade-lined cloak of tawny satin; with the long beard he had vowed not to cut till he returned to Portugal, he presented an impressive appearance. Before him marched his trumpeters, and his pages bearing the presents he had brought, including a gilded chair on which the Zamorin obligingly sat to conduct the audience. There was a theatrical tawdriness about the Portuguese procession, in comparison with the curious combination of extreme simplicity of dress and great richness of jewellery which the Zamorin, clad and adorned in the manner of Keralan sovereigns, presented to the curious eyes of his visitors.

> He was a very dark man, half naked and clothed with white cloths from the middle to the knees; one of these cloths ended in a long point on which were threaded several gold

rings with large rubies, which made a great show. He had on his left arm a bracelet above the elbow, which seemed like three rings together, the middle one larger than the others, all studded with rich jewels, particularly the middle one which bore large stones which could not fail to be of very great value. From this middle ring hung a pendent stone which glittered. It was a diamond of the thickness of a thumb; it seemed a priceless thing. Round his neck was a string of pearls about the size of hazel nuts; the string took two turns and reached to his middle. Above it he wore a thin round gold chain which bore a jewel of the form of a heart, surrounded with larger pearls, and all full of rubies. In the middle was a green stone of the size of a small bean, which from its showiness was of great price, which was called an emerald. . . . The king had long dark hair, all gathered up and tied on the top of his head with a knot made in it; and round the knot he had a string of pearls like those round his neck; and at the end of the string a pendent pearl pear-shaped and larger than the rest, which seemed a thing of great value. His ears were pierced with large holes, with many gold ear-rings of round beads. Close to the king stood a boy, his page, with a silk cloth round him. He held a red shield with a border of gold and jewels, and a boss in the centre of a span's breadth of the same material; and the rings inside for the arm were of gold; and also a short drawn sword of an ell's length, round at the point, with a hilt of gold and jewellery with pendent pearls.

Among the debts we owe to the Portuguese who reached the Malabar Coast on the early expeditions are such vivid detailed descriptions, the first clear pictures we possess of traditional Keralan life. But for da Gama the strangeness of his surroundings seems to have been no compensation for the evasiveness of the Zamorin when it came to questions of business. Could the Portuguese trade in Calicut? Could they establish a factory? No direct answer was given, and the Portuguese became increasingly suspicious of Arab intrigues. They even—with no apparent justification—became concerned for their own safety and seized five Malayalis as hostages; ignorant of local customs, they made

the mistake of picking low-caste fishermen. In the end the Zamorin agreed that the Portuguese might leave a factor to seek buyers for their unsold goods, provided the usual customs dues were paid. Vasco da Gama refused, and sailed away with his hostages. This confirmed in the Zamorin's mind the warnings he had received from the Arab merchants about the ambitions of the Portuguese and sowed the seeds of future hostility.

Yet, thanks to the rivalries of Keralan princes, the Portuguese efforts were not wasted. In Cannanore the Kolathiri welcomed them as potential allies against the Zamorin, whose numerically superior armies perpetually threatened his independence. He readily agreed to allow them to trade at his port, and helped them to purchase a cargo which, less than a year later in Lisbon, was sold at prices that brought in sixty times the cost of the expedition.

This first voyage set the pattern for the Portuguese presence on the Malabar Coast. The rivalry with the Arabs, the distrust of the Zamorin who saw their presence as a threat to his hegemony over Malabar, and the hostility between the Zamorin and other princes which the Portuguese could use to their advantage: these were constant elements in a situation that lasted more than a century.

In 1500 a larger expedition of thirteen ships was sent from Portugal under the command of Pedro Alvarez Cabral. Blown off course in the Atlantic, Cabral landed on the shores of Brazil and claimed it for his king. Then, proceeding on his way, he arrived at Calicut and immediately committed what in Malayali eyes amounted to an insult by sending ashore as his envoy one of the low-caste hostages—a fisherman now dressed in Portuguese clothes—whom da Gama had taken back with him to Portugal. Since the messenger could not be admitted to the palace and the effect of the slight had to die down, it was ten weeks before the Zamorin agreed to allow the Portuguese to build a factory. But Cabral was not content to be a trader among other traders. His aim was a monopoly of the spice trade, and he proceeded towards this end with a brutal impetuosity that too often characterized Portuguese actions in Kerala. He began by seizing an

Arab ship which was loading pepper in the harbour. In retaliation the Arabs on shore attacked and burnt the Portuguese factory, killing the factor and fifty other Portuguese in the battle that followed. Cabral in turn burnt ten Arab ships, some with their crews imprisoned under hatches, and bombarded the town. Then, realizing that nothing was to be gained by staying longer, he sailed south to Cochin, where he came upon another rivalry between Keralan princes which worked in the Portuguese favour.

Though the Raja of Cochin was a descendant of the Cheras, he now ruled over a small territory inhabited by unruly and often disloyal local chieftains. As a consequence, his predecessors had been unable to resist the superior armies of the Zamorin, and early in the 15th century they had been forced to acknowledge his suzerainty. Being Kshatriyas, they remained his social superiors, and bitterly resented their political subordination. As soon as the Raja of Cochin heard of the quarrel between the Portuguese and the Zamorin, he welcomed the newcomers as his natural allies. Through them he hoped to restore the independence of his realm and to tame the local chieftains. A treaty of friendship was immediately signed. The Portuguese promised to protect the Raja of Cochin and eventually to set him in the Zamorin's place as overlord of Malabar. In return the Raja gave them permission to trade freely, and he sent to the king in Lisbon a letter of friendship written on gold leaf.

In the meantime, with the willing help of the Arab traders, the Zamorin had assembled a fleet of eighty ships and 1,500 fighting men, which sailed down the coast towards Cochin. As soon as it was sighted off the island of Vypeen, Cabral's valour evaporated, and, having already loaded his ships, he set sail by night so hastily that he left thirty Portuguese ashore, one of whom, fortunately for posterity, was Duarte Barbosa, the best of the early European chroniclers of native life on the Malabar Coast.

During the next year, 1501, a Portuguese captain, Joano de Nova, fought a battle at sea with the Zamorin's fleet, sinking several vessels, and in 1502 Vasco da Gama was sent out a

second time with twenty ships which appeared off Calicut after having intercepted an Arab boat and burnt it with all its crew on board. At the sight of such a large fleet, the Zamorin adopted a conciliatory tone and offered compensation for the destruction of Cabral's factory. Da Gama countered by demanding the immediate expulsion of all the Arab merchants. The Zamorin refused. Da Gama then captured thirty-four Arabs, hanged them and cut off their heads, hands and feet. These gruesome relics he put into an open boat, together with a Brahmin envoy of the Zamorin who had arrived on a Portuguese safe-conduct, but who now drifted back to shore minus his ears, nose and hands, which were hung around his neck with a palm-leaf message to the Zamorin recommending him to make himself a curry of them. The hero of the *Lusiads* spent the next three days bombarding Calicut, and then sailed to Cochin, where he bullied the Raja into granting a Portuguese monopoly of the pepper trade and supervised the establishment of the fort at Cochin which was to be successively the centre of Portuguese, Dutch and British trading in Kerala until its final surrender to an independent India in 1947.

From this time onward the Raja of Cochin became a puppet of the Portuguese. In the long run his descendants gained, since Cochinese rule was established over the petty chieftains of the locality, and the state finally emerged as one of the three main political units on the Malabar Coast. But for this result the Rajas had to pay by swearing fealty to the king of Portugal and by accepting much humiliating interference in their affairs. Furthermore, their allegiance to the Portuguese incurred the lasting enmity of the Zamorin, who time and again, beginning in 1503, invaded and ravaged their territory.

In 1505 Francisco d'Almeida was appointed first Portuguese viceroy in India, and Fort Cochin became for some years the headquarters of the commercial empire in Asia, until in 1510 it was superseded by Goa. The consolidation of this empire was the work of the one really great administrator in Cochin, Affonso de Albuquerque, the conqueror of Malacca, who ruled from 1509 to 1515. Albuquerque's main achievement in Kerala itself

was the conclusion of a temporary peace with Calicut, which he achieved by persuading the heir apparent to poison the reigning Zamorin; after that, to the chagrin of the Rajas of Cannanore and Cochin, a treaty was concluded, and the Portuguese were allowed to establish a fort at Calicut. Shortly afterwards a treaty was also concluded with the Rani of Quilon, which allowed the Portuguese to establish a fort there and to dominate the affairs of the little principality almost as thoroughly as they dominated those of Cochin. For a few years the trade of the Malabar Coast was virtually in their hands.

But Albuquerque was followed by a remarkable series of incompetent governors, and, though Vasco da Gama came out for a third term in 1524 in the hope of reforming the administration, he died almost immediately in Cochin with little achieved. In any case, there were too many peoples displeased by the accord with the Zamorin for it to last long. The Raja of Cochin used every opportunity to provoke hostilities, and the Arabs began a guerrilla warfare against the Portuguese at sea. By 1524 the Kunjalis, the Moslem admirals of the Zamorin, were waging open war, and the Zamorin broke the truce and attacked the fort of Calicut, which the Portuguese were forced to abandon and destroy.

With the appointment of Nuno da Cunha as Viceroy in 1529 Portuguese fortunes took a turn for the better. Da Cunha played on the disloyalty of one of the Zamorin's vassals, the Raja of Tanur, who allowed him to build a fort at Chaliyam near the entrance to the Beypore river, only a few miles from Calicut itself. For forty years, though they never succeeded either in destroying the power of the Zamorin, whose strength still lay in the Malabar hinterland, or in expelling the Arabs from Kerala, the Portuguese did establish a blockade which disrupted Moslem trading activities. Ships not bearing Portuguese passes were confiscated and their crews were often summarily executed. In retaliation the Moslems harried the Portuguese with attacks by small mobile boats, which merely led to more atrocious reprisals. During these four decades there were intervals of peace, when both sides were too exhausted to carry on the struggle,

but the Portuguese hold on the Malabar Coast continued until in 1571 the Zamorin at last captured the vital stronghold of Chaliyam, and a generation of Portuguese efforts was undone.

For after this, though attacks on the Zamorin's towns and ships continued, the blockade became ineffective, and the Portuguese tacitly abandoned their effort to control the Malabar Coast as a whole, concentrating on the stretch, which was roughly a hundred miles in length, between Cochin and Quilon, the two centres where they held undisputed power. In this way they still controlled access to the richest pepper-growing region, on the rising ground around the present city of Kottayam; the supply failed only when the intrigues of the Zamorin persuaded the petty chieftains of the hills to withhold it.

In the new situation some of the original reasons for tension were reduced, and the Portuguese even found a certain advantage in periodically cultivating the friendship of the Zamorin in order to make sure that the Rajas of Cochin did not develop the illusion of being indispensable. The Zamorin had a similar problem, since his Moslem admirals, the Kunjalis, were trying to turn their fief into an independent state and at times were pursuing policies that militated against Calicut's interests, in the belief that the Zamorin could not do without them. In these circumstances a rapprochement seemed in the interests of both Calicut and the Portuguese; in 1584 permission was given to establish a fort at Ponnani in the Zamorin's dominions, and in 1587 Portuguese were allowed to live in Calicut and even to build a church there.

The Arabs did their best to wreck this new accord by continued attacks on Portuguese shipping. In 1586, and again in 1589, the Kunjalis defeated the Portuguese in pitched naval battles, and they became masters in the piratical art of picking off ships in trading convoys, using for this purpose what the English traveller Ralph Fitch called 'frigates' carrying a hundred armed men, and 'galliots' carrying two hundred. In 1591 the Portuguese finally defeated the Kunjali fleet, and a treaty was negotiated with the reigning head of the family, Kunjali III, which brought a few years of peace to the Malabar Coast. But in 1595,

when Kunjali IV succeeded, he strengthened the fortifications of Kottakkal, and renewed the attacks on the Portuguese more fiercely than ever. Ambition seemed to turn his head; he declared himself the king of the Moslems and the Lord of the Indian Seas; cut off the tail of one of the Zamorin's state elephants as a token of abandoning his allegiance, and insulted a Nair chieftain whom the ruler of Calicut had sent as an emissary.

The Portuguese recognized that this was the time to rid themselves of a formidable adversary. They formed an alliance with the Zamorin against the Kunjali and twice, in 1598 and 1600, attacked Kottakkal. The second assault, planned and led by Andre Furtado, was completely successful. Kunjali IV surrendered to the Zamorin on condition that his life be spared. But the agreement between the ruler of Calicut and the Portuguese was that he should receive the fortress of Kottakkal and they the prisoners. Kunjali and his lieutenants were taken to Goa where, in spite of the Zamorin's promise, they were publicly executed, and Kanjali's salted head was stuck on a pole in Cannanore as a warning to his fellow Arabs.

It seemed now as though the Portuguese had removed the greatest obstacle to regaining control of the whole Malabar Coast. But the execution of Kunjali shamed the Zamorin and renewed his resentment. Besides, since Portugal had been taken over by Spain in 1580, its power in Asia was a mere shadow of what it had been in the past, for the Spanish overlords were much more interested in their own possessions in America and their wars with the English and the Dutch. Even a distant event like the defeat of the Armada had its effect on Portuguese strength on the Malabar Coast, while the enemies of Spain, England and newly independent Holland, became automatically the enemies of Portugal.

The rivalry became economic as well as political, a war in which trade and the flag marched together. In 1594 a meeting of merchants in Amsterdam founded the Dutch East India Company, and in 1604 a Dutch fleet under Steven Van Der Hagen appeared off Calicut and concluded a treaty with the Zamorin aimed at driving the Portuguese out of India. It was almost sixty

years before they were finally expelled from the Malabar Coast, but in the hindsight of history one cannot see the end as other than inevitable. Portuguese administration had never been efficient, and almost from the beginning the fidalgos who controlled it had regarded their appointments as opportunities to make fortunes at the expense of their own government and of the natives of the country. Offices were bought, sold and even given as dowries, and the incorruptible or even efficient officials, like Affonso de Albuquerque, were so rare that they stand out in prominent historical relief.

Even more disastrous was the unexampled Portuguese power of making enemies. Princes who at first had found the Portuguese alliance in their interest were offended by arrogant conduct on the part of various commanders, so that first the Kolathiri of Cannanore and finally even the Raja of Cochin turned against them. In the context of Iberian history, their relentless enmity towards the Arabs can at least be explained, and in persecuting the Jews they were doing merely what their government and their Church did at home. But their religious bigotry went so far that in the end they made enemies of the very people who at first had seemed their obvious allies, the native Christians of the Malabar Coast.

During the first generation after Vasco da Gama's meeting with the Syrian Christians on his arrival at Cochin in 1502, the relationship between them and the Portuguese seemed cordial and relatively unsuspicious. The Christians regarded the Portuguese as their natural protectors, and the Portuguese availed themselves of the services of the Christians as soldiers and in other capacities. The Franciscans were the first Roman Catholic priests to arrive under Portuguese protection, and, though they detected the Nestorian heresies lurking in the liturgy and doctrines of the Syrian Church, and had every desire to turn these erring fellow Christians into good Catholics, they hoped to carry out a peaceful programme of gradual Latinization by training young Malayali priests in a seminary which they founded at Cranganore.

The influence of the Babylonian patriarchate had been re-

inforced by the arrival in 1503 of the new Metropolitan and the other Persian bishops, but one by one the members of the hierarchy died off, until only Mar Jacob remained, and he was too old and too tired to attempt any open resistance to the demands of the Roman Catholics. When the Jesuits arrived in 1542, Francis Xavier encountered the Nestorian bishop, and remarked that 'now in his old age he is very obedient to the customs of the Holy Mother the Church of Rome'. But among the priests and laymen of the Syrian Church there was much less inclination to accept the abandonment of their ancient liturgy and the breaking of their traditional links with Babylon.

The arrival of the Jesuits ended the easy relationship which had existed between the native Christians and the Portuguese. Jesuit activity proliferated in a number of directions. They were the first Christians for many centuries to proselytize among the Hindu population. Francis Xavier tramped along the Malabar Coast and by his mass conversions among the untouchable fishermen castes of Travancore and Cape Comorin he laid the first real foundations of Latin Rite Catholicism in India. But the Syrian Christians were a different problem, and in some ways a more obstinate one, since, unlike the Travancore fishermen, conversion to Roman Catholicism would bring to them no advantage in liberation from caste oppressions; they endured none. The policy of the Franciscans had achieved little and with an impetuosity paralleling that of the lay leaders among the Portuguese, the Jesuits began to think of stronger measures, of the Inquisition and of forcibly breaking the episcopal link with Babylon. The Persian bishops acted as centres of resistance, and it seemed to the Jesuits that, provided the Syrians could be deprived long enough of their own spiritual leaders, they would eventually accept the authority of Rome, if only to ensure the apostolic succession. Accordingly, in 1558 the Portuguese authorities in Cochin decreed that no foreign ecclesiastics—other than their own—should be allowed to land on the Malabar Coast.

As a result of this decree several Persian bishops were arrested at sea during the later 16th century; in spite of rumours of

drownings and executions at Goa, their fate is not definitely known. But three of them evaded capture and reached Kerala, and, of these, two were caught and died in captivity—one of them in Rome where he had been taken in the hope of amending his errors. The third, Mar Abraham, by compromise and diplomatic equivocation, managed to maintain his position from 1568 until his death in 1597; he was the last Nestorian Metropolitan to rule over the Syrian Church in India, and when he died the native Christians were once again without a bishop. Their leader became Archdeacon George, who ruled in the hope that another bishop from Babylon would find his way to Kerala.

Instead it was Alexis de Menezes, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Goa and Primate of All the East, who arrived at Cochin early in 1599 with the intent of finally forcing the Syrian Christians to accept the Latin rite. When he proposed to call a synod at the church of Udayamperur most of the Syrian priests, led by Archdeacon George, opposed him, but Menezes persuaded the Raja of Cochin, who at this period was completely dominated by the Portuguese, to threaten punishment to any Christians among his subjects who refused to submit to the instructions of the Roman Church. Nevertheless, when the meeting—which is remembered as the Synod of Diamper—did take place, a large minority of those present, representing some 30,000 people, refused to abide by its decisions, which resulted in the subordination of Syrian congregations to Latin bishops and in a great holocaust of so-called heretical writings in which almost all the records of early Christianity in India were destroyed. Immediately there followed the first schism in the history of the Syrian Church; the malcontents of Diamper, who still followed the Nestorian doctrines of the Church of the East, became the predecessors of the present Chaldean Church in India, whose Bishop in Trichur rules a miniature community of ten churches which maintains its ancient allegiance to the Patriarch of Babylon who now reigns over his scattered flock from the United States.

For fifty years the rest of the Syrian Christians—at least in the territory under more or less direct Portuguese control—bowed to Rome. Then, in 1653, occurred an incident which showed

how unwilling their submission had been. A Nestorian bishop, Atahallah, travelling in disguise from the Persian Gulf, was arrested at sea off Cochin and sent to Goa, where he was handed over to the Inquisition. Contrary to a tradition still existing in Cochin that he was burnt there, the records of the Inquisition show that he was sent to Lisbon and then to Rome, where traces of him vanish. But, on the journey, Atahallah had taken the precaution of sending a letter to Archdeacon Thomas, the leading Syrian priest in Kerala, and this created an immediate sensation in Cochin, where 20,000 people gathered and, led by the Archdeacon, marched on the Fort to demand the release of their bishop. The Portuguese nervously closed the gates, manned the cannon, and told the absurd lie that the bishop had been accidentally drowned. The angry Christians went to the church at Mattancherri, near the Paradesi synagogue of the White Jews, and there they swore on the leaning cross which stood outside the church an oath that henceforward they would abjure all allegiance to Rome. As the crowd was so numerous and so eager, long ropes were attached to the cross, and these the Christians held as they made their vow of resistance.

The oath of Coonen Cross—the Crooked Cross—is remembered to this day by Syrian Christians as the event that marked the resurrection of an independent native church on the Malabar Coast. At first almost all the Christians seceded from Rome; it is said that only 400 still maintained their allegiance. The universally distrusted Portuguese churchmen were helpless, and when the news reached Rome the Pope decided to send a group of Italian Carmelites, led by Father Sebastiani, on a conciliatory mission. The Carmelites behaved with exemplary patience and humility, and were materially helped by the fact that at first the Portuguese authorities would not recognize their right, as non-Iberians, to operate in Cochin. This aroused Malayali sympathies, and the Carmelite mission was so successful that 84 congregations returned to the Roman allegiance on the tacit understanding that a modified Syrian liturgy would be allowed. So began the Syrian Rite of the Roman Catholic Church in Kerala.

Only 32 congregations, it is said, remained independent at the end of the Carmelite mission. This statement is hard to reconcile with the fact that today, without any extensive proselytization, the Syrian Orthodox Church has at least twice as many adherents as the Syrian Rite of the Roman Church. The explanation is of course to be found in those Christian communities in the hinterland, centred upon places like Kottayam and Kothamangalam, who were not subject to either Portuguese or Cochinese power, and who never accepted subordination to Rome. Presumably, after Coonen Cross, the rebel congregations became reunited with them in the renascent Syrian Church.

Like the Cochin Jews, the Syrian Christians welcomed the displacement of the Portuguese by the Dutch in 1663. The persecution which in one form or another they had endured since the banning of the Persian bishops in 1558 was ended, and in 1665 their episcopal succession was re-established by the arrival of a bishop upholding the Syrian liturgy who came unimpeded by the Dutch. It is an ironical indication of the theological naïveté of the Indian Christians that the bishop they received with such delight was Mar Gregorius from Jerusalem, representative of the Patriarch of Antioch, bitter rival of the Patriarch of Babylon, an upholder of the heresy diametrically opposed to that of Nestorius—the Jacobite or Monophysite heresy first promulgated in the 5th century by Eutyches, who maintained that, since the human in Christ was absorbed by the divine, he had in effect only a divine nature. Such subtleties seemed of little importance in comparison with the need which the Syrian Christians felt to have bishops in the apostolic succession, and from this time onwards they became popularly known as Jacobites and remained subordinate to the Patriarch of Antioch until, early in the present century, the Catholicate of the East, which had long lapsed, was re-established, and the Syrian Church of Kerala became independent, governed by the Catholicos resident in Kottayam. Today the Syrian Christians maintain that doctrinally they are Orthodox in the same sense as the Greek Church, but there is no doubt that until Anglican influence

came to bear on them during the 19th century they maintained the Monophysite heresy, and that this was the final effect of the breaking of the Nestorian link by the Portuguese.

When one considers the Portuguese record in Kerala, it is easy to concentrate on its more dramatically unpleasant aspects and to forget the better side, and the changes, some of them undoubtedly beneficial, which were brought to Keralan life. Perhaps the best thing of all that can be said for the Portuguese is that, however bigoted they may have been in religion, they were almost devoid of racial prejudices. Wherever they went, colour bars did not exist. Portuguese soldiers and officials were encouraged to marry Keralan women, and Malayalis, provided they became Christians, had equal rights with whites in the municipality which was set up in Fort Cochin. Converts were often given high military and civil posts, and some were even ennobled. It could also be said that Francis Xavier, with his mass conversions among the outcaste fishermen of Travancore, struck the first blow in the long battle to end the evils of untouchability.

Economically, with their insatiable demand for pepper and other spices, the Portuguese accelerated the tendency for agriculture to concentrate on cash crops for export at the expense of food crops, to such an extent that as early as the 16th century rice was already being imported because local production was insufficient. In 1557 when the Portuguese blockaded the rice ships coming down the coast from Mangalore, Calicut was threatened with famine, and in 1583 the English traveller Ralph Fitch, visiting Cochin, remarked on 'the scarcity of victuals; for here groweth neither corne, nor rice, and the greatest part commeth from Bengala'. The shortage of rice in Kerala, which in recent years has received a great deal of publicity, is thus a condition that has been endemic ever since the Portuguese changed the economic balance of Keralan agriculture.

On the other hand, the Portuguese encouraged a much more systematic and scientific way of farming cash crops than the Malayalis had hitherto practised, and in the process they changed the very appearance of the Keralan countryside. Before they

arrived, the coconut had been cultivated mainly for local use. It was they who, having discovered the use of coconut fibres in making sturdy coir ropes, began to encourage its commercial cultivation and thus made copra and coir articles of world trade. They even introduced from Africa a new strain of coconut which produced bigger and better fruit than the trees the Ezhavas had brought on their wanderings so long ago. Today it is these Portuguese coconuts—'ship-borne coconuts' as they are called in Malayalam—which are planted for mile after mile along the coast of Kerala and which, more than any other element, create the peculiar beauty of the landscape. They are not the only familiar Keralan plant that came with the Portuguese, who introduced both the papaya and the pineapple, which are now cultivated in almost every Malayali compound, and also the cashew-nut which has become an important export crop; the Malayalis still call it the Frankish Mango (Parangi Mavu).

In architecture and town planning, in education and, more negatively, in warfare, the Portuguese also helped to change the nature of Keralan life. To this day Fort Cochin, which they originally planned and built, is the nearest thing to a European town in Kerala, with its dense population, its compactness, its streets of houses and shops laid out in regular patterns and its large masonry warehouses and public buildings. Yet Cochin as it exists now is only a ghost of Portuguese Cochin, with its palaces, colleges and churches. The Dutch pulled down many of these buildings, but one Dutchman, Captain Nieuhoff, the famous voyager, remembered them with regret.

> In the suburbs towards the land side were several godly churches, and a little nearer the seashore was the monastery of St. John. The Franciscans and Jesuits had likewise their several convents, all magnificently built with very pleasant gardens and walks. Among other steeples that of St. Paul, being magnificently built of square stones, excelled all the rest in height and beauty, which is since demolished with all the churches except one.

The one remaining church which still survives at Fort Cochin as a monument to the Portuguese is that of St. Francis, built ori-

ginally as the Church of St. Anthony in 1516, and used successively as a government church by the Calvinist Dutch and the Anglican English. There are still, however, Portuguese churches with splendid whitewashed baroque façades which have survived in villages along the backwaters and on the seashore, and near Cranganore stands the last surviving example of another type of Portuguese architecture, the grim, square, utilitarian block of the deserted fort of Pallipuram, so massive that the centuries have worn away at it to little effect. Portuguese domestic architecture even had its influence on the tastes of the native princes. Before Vasco da Gama came the palaces were wooden buildings; often quite small, where the kings would stay for short periods, travelling from one to the other like the earlier emperors of Japan. In 1555, however, the Portuguese at Mattancherri built as a gift to the Raja of Cochin a large stone palace with thick walls and a heavy tiled roof, which still survives under the misleading name of the Dutch Palace and which contains one of the finest groups of traditional Indian mural paintings in Kerala. The Dutch Palace set a fashion for mansions built of masonry, and during the Portuguese period many such buildings were apparently constructed for the use of the Nair nobles in trading towns like Cochin, Quilon and Calicut.

The Portuguese colleges set up by the Franciscans at Cranganore and the Jesuits at Vaippicotta and Cochin were religious in intent, founded in order to increase Roman Catholic influence among the Syrian Christians, but they fulfilled another purpose by teaching Latin and Portuguese to many hundreds of young Malayalis, and in this way they represent the beginning of the great educational movement which was later to make Kerala the most literate region of all India. Not only the local Christians, but also many of the Hindu chiefly families were influenced by this early Western education. 'The later Rajahs of Cochin', says K. M. Pannikar, 'conversed fluently in Portuguese, and often corresponded directly in that language. In fact, till the establishment of British supremacy in Kerala, Portuguese continued to be the diplomatic language of the Kerala rulers. For instance, all the letters addressed by the Zamorin to the English factor, for

over half a century after the disappearance of the Portuguese from Kerala, were written in the language of Camoens.'

Except for their contributions to agriculture, which have affected the lives of even the poorest Keralans, and their military innovations—particularly the increased use of firearms—which made Keralan wars a great deal more destructive than they had previously been, one might contend that the contributions of the Portuguese—such as those in architecture and education—had their effect mainly on the lives of a small, mainly upper-class minority in a few of the trading towns. Certainly, in comparison with the changes which British domination brought in the ways of life of every section of the community, the effect of the Portuguese occupation was slight. But in another sense they were responsible for all that came afterwards from the Western world, since it was the trade they established that linked the fate of Kerala with the life of Europe for almost three centuries after they had gone. In fact, except politically, the link has not yet been broken, for Kerala is still more dependent than any other part of India on its foreign trade and hence on the vicissitudes of world markets.

8

The Dutch and the Rise of Travancore

THE aim of the Dutch at the beginning of the 17th century was to take over the whole of the Portuguese trading empire in Asia. But though they made their first contacts with the princes of Kerala early in the 17th century, and continued friendly relations with them for half a century, it was not until 1658, when they expelled the Portuguese from Ceylon, that they finally began a serious campaign on the Malabar Coast.

At the end of that year the Dutch made the first attack in strength, when Admiral Van Goens captured the Portuguese fort at Quilon. Next spring their garrison there was forced to retreat to Colombo, but shortly afterwards a succession dispute in Cochin provided an excuse to intervene on a larger scale and with at least a show of legitimacy. In 1646 the senior line of the Cochin royal house had proved insufficiently docile for the Portuguese, and had been dispossessed. Their cause was supported openly by the Zamorin of Calicut and some of the more important princes of central Kerala. Secretly the Paliath Achan, the Lord of Paliyam and hereditary Chief Minister of the State of Cochin, was also in their favour; his support was important since he owned the strategic Vypeen Island which guarded the entrance of Cochin harbour.

On the advice of the Paliath Achan, the head of the dispossessed Cochin line, Vira Kerala Varma, visited Colombo and laid his case before the Dutch, who agreed to assist him, and early in 1661 an expedition under Van Der Meyden landed near Cranganore, concluded an agreement with the Zamorin, and seized the Portuguese fort of Pallipuram. At this time

15. Vijinjam: fisher children

16. Fires of discontent: Trichur policemen putting out a fire set by demonstrating students, January 1966

they did not feel powerful enough to make a direct assault on Cochin, but in January 1662 they returned and fought a battle outside the palace of Mattancherri in which the reigning Raja was killed and the captured Rani was forced to recognize their protégé as the rightful king of Cochin. But the siege of the Portuguese fort which followed this partial victory dragged on for two months and so depleted the Dutch forces that they withdrew, returning again after the monsoons with a much larger force which cut off Portuguese supplies by occupying the island of Vypeen and seizing the native town of Ernakulam. On January 7th Fort Cochin fell to the assault of the Dutch and their Malayali allies, and, dressed in mourning, the successors of Vasco da Gama and Albuquerque handed over the keys of the city and took their dignified departure. The Portuguese epoch in Kerala was at an end.

The Dutch were to remain in Kerala until they were finally expelled by the British in 1796. But one can hardly talk of a Dutch era in the same way as one talks of a Portuguese or a British era. The Dutch came merely for trade. They had no ambition either to win a land for their God or to become the political overlords of the Malabar Coast. Their policies were therefore less forceful and less impetuous than those of the Portuguese. To safeguard their base at Cochin they had to treat this one principality as a vassal state and to maintain fortresses on its borders, and for the same reason they were to become involved in the wars between principalities which disturbed Kerala throughout the 18th century. But at no time did they try to reimpose the blockade by which the Portuguese had attempted to ruin their Arab rivals, and they undoubtedly gained from the free local trading that resulted; the port of Cochin, which had declined in the last generations of Portuguese rule, revived under the Dutch, and a British visitor to that city in the 18th century recorded his impression that 'a harbour filled with ships, streets crowded with merchants and warehouses stored with goods from every part of Asia and Europe marked the industry, the commerce and the wealth of the inhabitants'.

The Dutch administration was relatively efficient, and, for the

period, surprisingly unmarred by corruption. There were no excessive barbarities when wars were waged against local chieftains. Towards the people of Kerala the attitude of the Dutch was one of liberal tolerance; Syrian Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, all were free from any kind of persecution, and even the Latin Catholics, after suffering a few disabilities in the very early years of Dutch rule, were afterwards treated with such liberality that Pope Clement XIV in 1772 sent a message to the Governor of Cochin thanking him for his 'Christian acts of kindness'.

But it was a tolerance in some ways very near to indifference. The Dutch, unlike the Portuguese before or the British after them, were not interested in bringing the benefits of Western civilization to the people of Kerala, except by way of trade. They founded no colleges, established no libraries, and made almost no attempt at missionary activities. Though they employed the Ezhavas as soldiers and occasionally in other humble capacities, and thus helped this caste indirectly in its long climb out of untouchability, they were inspired by no passion to assert the equality of the humble in the eyes of God like that which sent Francis Xavier preaching among the poor and lowly fishermen.

Their attitude towards the places where they settled was particularly significant. While the Portuguese had built in Cochin as if they were constructing a future metropolis, with a massive fort, churches, convents, colleges and palaces, the Dutch deliberately reduced the area of the fort and the city, and pulled down almost all the public buildings which the Portuguese had erected. The buildings they constructed were devoted to commerce, and if we are reminded of the Portuguese by the great churches they left behind in the villages of the Malabar Coast, we are reminded of the Dutch by the warehouses along the waterfront at Mattancherri and the merchants' houses in Fort Cochin.

Yet if one cannot find the monument to their domination of Kerala in any single splendid building, one might, surprisingly, find it in a book. Characteristically, that book is not a baroque poem inflating the achievements of the Dutch in Kerala, in the

tradition of Camoens's absurd but splendid panegyric on da Gama in *The Lusiads*, but an immense botanical treatise, the *Hortus Malabaricus*, a work of twelve volumes on the medicinal properties of Indian plants which was the result of years of work by native flower gatherers, by Malayali, Dutch and Portuguese scholars, and by the Carmelite Father Matthaeus who prepared sketches for the eight hundred copper plate engravings, all carried out under the active supervision of the Governor, Van Rheede. It was a work of scholarship and artistry, but above all it was eminently utilitarian, and so it reflects the spirit of the Dutch administration. For the one field in which they positively benefited Kerala was in the extension of the agricultural improvements introduced by the Portuguese and in the introduction of such industries as salt-making and dyeing.

Politically the Dutch age in Kerala does not stand out in emphatic chiaroscuro like that of the Portuguese, mainly because issues had ceased to be clearly defined, and their proponents had ceased to be passionately involved. One can no longer see the relationship between Europeans and Malayalis as a long-drawn-out drama of blood, with, most of the time, the Portuguese on one side, the Zamorins and the Arabs on the other, and the hegemony of the Malabar Coast as the prize. The Dutch never sought the hegemony of the Malabar Coast, never thought in terms of destroying the Arabs or of reducing the Zamorin to a puppet like the Raja of Cochin. At most, in the beginning, they had some idea of maintaining a balance of power among the fifty different principalities into which Kerala was divided in 1663 when they reached Cochin, and of reaping the advantage not politically but commercially by dominating the pepper trade and regulating the prices to their own advantage.

Such an aim was in fact unattainable even in 1663. The Dutch had not been long in Kerala before they found themselves drawn into the internecine feuds between various branches of the Cochin royal house, and not, as they had hoped, merely as arbitrators, but rather as participants in a series of petty wars which began with a rising of the discontented nobles in 1674 and continued intermittently throughout their period of rule. And

though, unlike the Portuguese, they would have preferred in the interests of trade a cessation of the feud between the Zamorins and the rulers of Cochin, they found it impossible to curb the traditional rivalries, and became unhappily involved in long wars with the ruler of Calicut which they fought often incompetently—so that they suffered a number of humiliating minor defeats—and always with an eye to the cost in men and money, both of which the Portuguese had squandered recklessly. In the middle of the long war between Calicut and Cochin, which dragged on from 1701 to 1710 and again from 1715 to 1718, only to end with no territory gained on either side, their attitude was illustrated in a letter which the Dutch Governor General in Batavia wrote to the Raja of Cochin:

> I do not know how much treasure and how much blood has been spent by the Honourable Company to aggrandize your family. But I know one thing. Our advice to put the affairs of the State in order has been uniformly disregarded by your Highness. . . . The Company are not averse to give support to Cochin agreeably to our treaty, but they will not at all times send their soldiers to fight your Highness's battles. For the last 50 years Malabar has been a source of large expense and little gain.

But there were other developments on the coast and in the hinterland of Kerala which prevented a repetition of the 16th-century pattern of a single European power involved, whether willingly or the reverse, in the traditional quarrels of the native states; and these developments were in the end to expel the Dutch from Kerala, and to sweep from history the Zamorins, those strangely faceless figures whom even the local historians rarely mention by their individual names.

The Dutch were not the only Europeans anxious to feast on the great spice trade which the Portuguese had created and been forced to abandon. As early as 1616 the English Captain Kealing had established a friendly accord with the Zamorin, and to the south, in Travancore, the East India Company had won a foothold in 1644 by establishing a factory at Vijinjam, the old capital of the Ay kings. At Purrukad near Alleppey they started trading

in 1664, paying higher prices for pepper than the Dutch, and though they were expelled because of an agreement between the Dutch and the Raja of this vulnerable little state, they established themselves shortly afterwards at Calicut and at Tellicherry in the realm of the Kolathiri Raja of Cannanore. In 1690 they obtained permission from the Rani of Attingal to build a fort at Anjengo, north of Trivandrum, which eventually became the largest of the East India Company's establishments on the Malabar Coast and whose sandy, palm-shadowed site figures in English literary history as the birthplace of Sterne's Eliza Draper. The Dutch realized immediately the danger of English competition. 'Every means should be employed and every effort made to have the English expelled from the land of the Zamorins,' ran a letter written as early as 1667 from the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company in Amsterdam. 'It will never do to have that nation settled so near us.'

But the English remained, and under their most active administrators, Robert Adams in Calicut and Alexander Orme in Anjengo, they energetically cultivated the favour of the local princes of Calicut and Travancore. Other nations followed their example. The French from Pondicherry, after trading for a while at Calicut, seized in 1725 the small town of Mayyazhi, which had a protected river-mouth harbour a few miles from the British fort at Tellicherry. The assault was made by raft under the command of a young captain, Bertrand François Mahé de Labourdonnais, and in his honour the town was renamed Mahé; in spite of wars between France and England, and skirmishes with the East India Company's men from Tellicherry, it remained except for brief intervals in French hands up to the coming of Indian independence, when it was surrendered voluntarily along with Pondicherry and the other French possessions. Still, even today, it retains a nostalgically Gallic flavour as a tiny enclave where the policemen wear the képis of French gendarmes and the public buildings keep the old legends over their doors—Palais de Justice, Trésoir, Ecole de Filles. Even the Danes took their part in the Malabar trade, establishing small factories at Calicut and at Edava in the domain of Attingal, and free-

booting outlaws came to traffic on their own; in 1690 the famous pirate, Captain Kidd, was trading with the Raja of Kayankulam.

Now it was no longer possible for the Dutch to attempt some violent solution to the problem of competition like the Amboyna massacre which early in the 17th century had decisively ended the English attempt to trade in the Indonesian archipelago; such an act would merely have invited intervention by the British and French navies which were steadily growing in power in comparison with the Dutch. The only alternatives were commercial competition and diplomacy. At first the Dutch attempted to buy up pepper at high prices to keep the English out of the market, but they found that some rulers still preferred to trade with their competitors, and in any case they were hampered in this kind of operation by the high cost of keeping a large armed force in Cochin and fighting the unavoidable wars. The traders of other countries, operating from small, easily defended forts or factories, avoided such problems. In diplomacy the Dutch were equally at a disadvantage because they were tied to the interests of Cochin. The British, French and Danes made no political demands on any of the rulers, and were always willing to sell them arms, in spite of the protests of the Dutch. The result was that everywhere but in central Kerala, where the Dutch presence in Cochin made it difficult for them to trade, the relations between the English and French and the local rulers were customarily excellent.

When conflicts did arise, they were usually due to the Nair noblemen who felt their power threatened by the accord between their rulers and the foreign traders. But even incidents of this kind could be turned to eventual use by the traders, as happened in the Attingal incident of 1721, whose consequences helped to change the whole course of 18th-century Keralan politics.

Each year the East India Company's officials at Anjengo used to send a present called the Nazzur to the Senior Rani of Attingal. In 1721 this present was demanded by the agents of the Pillamar, the council of nobles (the Lords of the Eight Houses) who were then exercising an oligarchic authority in Travancore

and Attingal. Gyfford, the Chief Factor, suspected that if the gift ever got into the hands of the Pillamar, it would never reach the Rani, so he set off with 140 armed men to present it in person. The local Nairs were incensed by this display of force, and, urged on by members of the Pillamar, they attacked the English and killed them all. A few native servants escaped and reached the fort with the news of the massacre, and Gunner Samuel Ince, the sole man left with any shred of authority, took charge, sent the women and children away in a ship that happened to be lying in the harbour, and for six months, with a force of thirty-five boys and pensioners, defended the fort until reinforcements arrived from Tellicherry and Bombay.

The Rani of Attingal and the Raja of Travancore took the side of the English, doubtless for reasons of their own, since the Travancore royal house, to which the Rani belonged, had long been impatient with the impositions of the Pillamar. They expressed sympathy, offered compensation and, more important for the future, agreed to a treaty with the East India Company, the first treaty ever signed between the Company and an Indian state. This represented a new phase of British policy in India, since its underlying intent was clearly to obtain political influence, though at this stage the British had no intention of becoming involved so deeply as either the Dutch or the Portuguese. The treaty was completed in 1723 and was signed, on behalf of the reigning raja, Rama Varma, by his nephew, adviser and heir, Martanda Varma. It provided for the Raja to build a fortress at Colachel in South Travancore, for which the Company would give all the necessary artillery and munitions. Clause 6 declared that, 'The Government will be in league and united in good fellowship with the Honourable Company,' and a subsequent letter from Alexander Orme agreed on behalf of the Company to give the Raja any aid he might require in destroying the power of the Pillamar.

The treaty was an immediate blow to Dutch interests in southern Kerala, since most of the trade in Travancore quickly fell into British hands. But it had an even broader significance, since it was the first sign of the rise of a new power in Kerala, the

state of Travancore, reformed into a centralized despotic kingdom—the first of its kind in Keralan history.

For the four centuries since the reign of Ravi Varma, the 14th-century conqueror of Kanchipuram, the Kulasekharas of Venad had played a withdrawn and steadily diminishing role in Keralan affairs. Their realm had shrunk into a small state stretching from Trivandrum down to Cape Comorin, ruled from the little capital of Padmanabhapuram, where the exquisite wooden palace which the kings of Venad inhabited still stands in a state of fine preservation within its encircling walls of Cyclopean granite. Attingal remained a dependency of Venad; it was ruled by the senior female member of the royal line as a miniature matriarchy. The remainder of former Venad, up to and beyond Quilon, had fallen apart into a number of petty principalities, ruled in some cases by junior branches of the Kulasekhara line, but acknowledging no loyalty to the ruler in Padmanabhapuram. The annals of the state of Travancore (as it was now more often called and as we shall henceforward call it) record occasional wars, in the 16th century with the already dwindling Deccanese empire of Vijayanagar, and in the 17th and 18th centuries with the Nayaks who had usurped the old Pandyan kingdom of Madurai, but these resulted in little glory and no permanent gains in territory.

Because it was now squeezed into the far south of Kerala, this vestigial state took on a character somewhat different from the regions to the north. Owing to the Pandyan invasions in the past and to the sustained cultural influence of Madurai, a large proportion of the people remained Tamil rather than Malayali in both language and customs. The spiritual centres—the great temples of Suchindram and Trivandrum—were and still are architectural monuments in the southern Tamil style, with massively ornate gopurams or gate towers and complexes of stone buildings, quite unlike the more modest wooden buildings of the authentic Keralan temples. Politically the most important aspect of this situation was the great influence of the Tamil Brahmins, who in Travancore outnumbered the Keralan Nambudiris and controlled the major temples. The Sri Padmanabhan temple in Trivandrum held jenmom rights over vast areas of land, which

gave the priests great economic power, and during the 17th century the Yoggakar, the council of eight Brahmins who had originally governed the temple lands under the king's supervision, sought greater political power for itself and for the Pillamar, the eight noble clans who collected its revenues. During the reign of the weak Aditya Varma (1661–77) open strife broke out between the king and the Yogakkar and between various factions within the Yogakkar; after Aditya Varma died (according to popular accounts from poison) and Umayamma Rani took over as regent, the land collapsed into a chaos of warring factions in which every feudatory chief sought only his own advantage.

The situation was complicated by the infertility of the royal line. This had caused the adoption of a series of heirs from royal houses in central and northern Kerala, which aroused great local resentment. In 1677 a popular pretender took the field with a considerable army, and the civil war which ensued was barely settled when, in 1680, a Moslem freebooter from Tamilnad was tempted by the vacuum of power to invade the country south of Travancore and to rule it for some time. This soldier of fortune, whose name has not been remembered, was defeated and killed by a prince from Malabar, Kerala Varma, whom the Rani had called in to assist her, but as soon as Kerala Varma attempted to strengthen the royal authority over the Nairs he was assassinated. These incidents were followed by a series of marauding invasions by the Nayaks of Madurai, while the local farmers, who had to bear the brunt of these misfortunes, revolted, refused to pay their taxes, and assaulted the Brahmins. At vast public meetings summoned by trumpet, the peasants vowed to migrate from Travancore and leave the land uncultivated if their grievances went unheard.

It was into this land in chaos, where the reigning raja was as often a fugitive on the run from his enemies as a resident in his palace, that Martanda Varma was born in 1706. He grew up a strong-willed and precocious boy. The legends that later clustered around his name claim that at the age of fourteen he had already formed his resolution to destroy the nobles and assert

the royal power. Certainly he was only 17 when he signed the agreement with the East India Company on behalf of his uncle, Rama Varma. Having secured one powerful ally, Martanda Varma three years later induced his uncle to conclude an accord with the Nayaks of Madurai, which had the double advantage of cutting off raids and providing a force of soldiers independent of the local Nairs, whose loyalty was still to the feudal magnates first, and only indirectly to the king.

When Martanda Varma succeeded in 1729 he got rid of the force loaned by the Nayaks and recruited in its place a mercenary army of Maravas from the Madras coast. Then, in 1730, he moved to crush his enemies. It was high time, for the Brahmins and the rebellious nobles had put up a pretender in the person of Padmanabhan Thampi, one of the late king's sons who, according to the law of matrilineal succession, had no right at all to the throne of Travancore. Even the Nayaks turned against Martanda Varma and sent an army to support his adversaries, but he bribed the commander over to his side and then, taking Padmanabhan Thampi and his supporters by surprise, captured all the leaders of the rebellion. The conspirators were summarily executed (except for a few Brahmins who were banished), their houses were destroyed, their wives and children sold to the low-caste fishermen. In meting out such harsh sentences, Martanda Varma went against all Keralan precedent, which regarded high-caste Nairs as immune from severe punishment, but the policy was effective; he encountered no further serious opposition from the nobles. Having destroyed the oligarchy from which Travancore had suffered so long and so much, he proceeded to remodel his administration on centralized authoritarian lines, with a hierarchy reaching right down into the villages, and to reorganize his army, equipping it with arms supplied by the English and the French.

By 1731 he was ready to turn northward and to reconquer the domains of his predecessors. It is unnecessary to describe in detail how all the small principalities which had been formerly part of the kingdom of Venad fell into his hands, and sufficient to say that by the time of his death he ruled over a kingdom

several times the size of that which he inherited, and stretching from the borders of Cochin down to Cape Comorin. The state of Travancore which lasted for the next two hundred years was entirely his creation.

The critical point in this campaign of aggrandizement came when, moving north up the map of Kerala, he eventually encountered the Dutch. Through the first half of the 1730s they had watched his activities with apprehension, realizing that they posed an eventual threat to Cochin and that their own factories along the coast were in even more urgent danger if the advance of this friend of the English were not halted. Accordingly they adopted the time-honoured device of posing as the protectors of a small state and using its misfortunes as an excuse for starting hostilities. The tiny state of Elayadathu Swarupam became a Keralan Belgium. The Raja had been dispossessed by Martanda Varma and taken as a prisoner to Trivandrum, where he died in 1736. The ranking Rani, who like a queen bee was the key to succession in a matrilineal state, managed to escape and seek the protection of the Dutch. The authorities in Batavia considered the situation critical enough to send Van Imhoff, the governor of Ceylon, to gain Martanda Varma's agreement to surrender Elayadathu Swarupam. Even Van Imhoff's considerable powers of persuasion failed to make any impression on the young ruler, and the Dutch decided to try a *fait accompli*, and, accepting as their price a rich farming property, installed the princess forcibly in her realm. Martanda Varma immediately attacked and the Dutch, with the small body of adherents who had rallied to the Rani, were defeated. The Rani fled to Cochin, and Martanda Varma's army attacked and captured the Dutch forts along the coast up to the Cochin border.

The Dutch decided to counter with an attack on the southern heart of Travancore, and in the intense summer heat of August 1741, ferried an army from Ceylon and landed at Colachel. Having built a stockade, they began to advance on Padmanabhapuram. Martanda Varma hurried south and attacked the Dutch with his cavalry before they had reached the capital, forcing them to retreat to their stockade and eventually to their

ships. It was not, by the standards of most wars, a great battle; comparatively few people were killed, and the Dutch made their escape, leaving only a few cannon, many muskets and 24 European prisoners. But the moral effect of the victory was immense, increasing greatly Martanda Varma's prestige as the first Keralan prince to inflict a decisive blow on the Dutch, and, so far as the Dutch themselves were concerned, ending any visions they may once have had of maintaining their dominant trading position by acting as the arbiters between the native princes. In fact their prestige was so weakened that almost immediately, in 1742, the Zamorin renewed his attacks on Cochin from the north. The new situation was acknowledged in the formal treaty of Mavelikara which was eventually signed in 1753; the Dutch pledged themselves to complete neutrality in Kerala by undertaking not to support any of the princes whom the rulers of Travancore might choose to attack, and to take up arms in future only in self-defence.

Yet perhaps the most important prize of Colachel for Martanda Varma was a future General. In the palace of Padmanabhapuram there still hangs a crude oil painting by a Travancore princeling showing the scene of battle, the stockade of Colachel, the Dutch ships fleeing and, in the foreground, a dignified 18th-century European in powdered wig kneeling before the bare-torsoed and bejewelled raja and offering his sword. The sword was accepted, but to be used in Martanda Varma's service, for the prisoner, a Walloon captain named Eustache de Lannoy, entered the Raja's employment, and helped to form a standing army organized, trained and armed on the Western model, the first of its kind among the native principalities of Kerala. De Lannoy rose to the rank of General, and among the people of Travancore, who tend to treasure their separate history, he is remembered with respect as the Valia Kappithan, the Old Captain; even today his tomb at Padmanabhapuram, with its florid Latin inscription, is still often visited.

De Lannoy's reorganization of the Travancore army was decisive in the last important campaign of Martanda Varma's life, when the inevitable clash with Cochin came in 1754. The

armies of the two states met, after a few preliminary skirmishes, at the battle of Ambalapuzha, inland from Alleppey. It was the last fight of the traditionalist Nairs against the modern conceptions of government and warfare represented by Martanda Varma's Travancore. Like a Malayali Scott, the historian K. M. Pannikar nostalgically lists the great chieftains who gathered there.

This was in fact the last great fight undertaken by Cochin —the last field where the Cochin flag flew. The great noble families of the state were all there, Kumu Achan—the new heir of Paliyam, a brave and handsome youth of 18, but even in that early age giving the promise of highest distinction in war and statecraft, the personification of the feudal chivalry of latter day Kerala—the chief of Kodasseri, the Kaimal of Panamukkam, the Changaramkoda Kailam, the President of the 30,000 of Tottasseri and the rest of the great families of Cochin, forgot their ancient rivalries and took up their position behind Palliyal Idikkela Menon in an attempt to stem the tide of Travancorean aggression.

The battle turned into an Asian Culloden. The massed clans of Cochin, unsupported by the now neutral Dutch, fought with sword and target against the regiments trained by de Lannoy, and were completely routed; the day of the Nair as a feudal warrior came to an end on the field of Ambalapuzha. The victory was followed by a treaty of friendship in 1757 which marked the beginning of an unbroken peace between Travancore and Cochin, at the price of some loss of territory and real independence to the smaller state. In 1761, after Martanda Varma's death, a second treaty was signed by his successor Rama Varma (known popularly as the Dharma Raja for his almost fanatical dedication to what he considered the duties of kingship), which pledged Travancore to assist Cochin against the Zamorin, who had taken advantage of the demoralization caused by the defeat of Ambalapuzha to seize Parur, Alwaye and the important town of Trichur. Led by de Lannoy, the combined forces of the two states pushed the Zamorin's levies out of the towns they had captured. Peace followed almost imme-

diately, and in 1763 the Zamorin and the Dharma Raja met at Padmanabhapuram, to reach an accord in which the ruler of Calicut agreed not to invade Cochin and to submit all future disputes to Travancore for arbitration. At this moment Travancore, the revived realm of the Kulasekharas, had moved into the leading position among the states of the Malabar Coast, and one can reasonably assume that, if outside forces had not strongly intervened, some long-term settlement of the Keralan situation under the leadership and eventually suzerainty of the heirs of the Cheras might well have evolved.

But, within three years of the accord between Travancore and Calicut, the fortifications known as the Travancore Lines—which de Lannoy began to build in 1763 north of Parur in case the Zamorin might forget his promises—were to become a protection against a more formidable enemy when Hyder Ali of Mysore led the Moslems of the North through the Palghat Gap in their long-delayed but not unexpected invasion of Kerala.

9

Moslem Invaders and the Pax Britannica

In 1757 Hyder Ali was a local commander in the service of the Hindu king of Mysore. At this time the Zamorin of Calicut had tried to impose his authority over the principality of Palghat, which commanded the main pass through the Western Ghats to Coimbatore and Tamilnad. Already he had annexed part of the state, when the local Raja, Komu Achan, appealed for protection to the King of Mysore, agreeing to accept his suzerainty and to pay him an annual tribute. Hyder Ali was ordered to go to his aid, but a political crisis in Seringapatam necessitated his presence there to protect his own interests, and he appointed his brother-in-law, Mukhdum Sahib, commander of the force of 7,000 men—cavalry, infantry and artillery—which moved into Palghat and not only drove the Calicut forces out of the territory, but pursued them down to the coast. The decisive element was Mukhdum Sahib's use of cavalry, which the warriors of northern Kerala had never before encountered. The Zamorin immediately sued for peace, gave up the territory he had annexed in Palghat, and agreed to pay an indemnity of 1,200,000 rupees. Mukhdum Sahib returned to Mysore, and the indemnity was never paid.

In 1761 Hyder Ali became the virtual master of Mysore, turning the reigning king into a puppet and ruling in his name. His attention turned immediately to Malabar, not merely because of the outstanding indemnity, but also because he needed access to Mahé so that the French could supply him with arms. In 1763 he conquered territories on the northern bounds of Malabar, and later secured a rather uneasy undertaking of neutrality from the

East India Company's officials at Tellicherry in case he should attack Calicut. His next aim was to secure an ally within Malabar, and he had no difficulty in this; the only Moslem ruler in Kerala, the Ali Raja of Cannanore, met him in Mangalore and promised help, in the hope that he himself would reap rewards in power and lands.

In February 1766, at the head of 12,000 men, Hyder Ali entered Kerala and, without great resistance, occupied the small principalities in the extreme north. At Kurumbranad on the way to Calicut the Zamorin came out to meet him. Hyder Ali was willing to leave the territory of Calicut uninvaded, provided the Zamorin accepted his suzerainty, to which the latter agreed, but he was unable to meet Hyder Ali's demand for an enormous indemnity which some reports—difficult to believe in the light of Indian state finances at the time—place as high as ten million gold mohurs. Hyder Ali accordingly placed the Zamorin under virtual house arrest in his palace, while fighting continued south of the city between the Mysore forces and the Nairs led by the heir apparent. In the end, humiliated by the treatment he was receiving, the Zamorin arranged for his family to be smuggled out to a refuge in Travancore, while he set fire to the palace and died in the flames.

The death of the Zamorin left Hyder Ali master of Calicut, and immediately he claimed suzerainty over north and central Kerala. The Dutch, anxious to avoid warfare which might harm their commercial interests, sent their commissioners to Calicut to ask the Mysorean leader to refrain from attacking Cochin and Travancore. Hyder Ali agreed, provided they accepted his suzerainty and paid tribute. The Raja of Cochin submitted, but the Dharma Raja temporized, relying on the army which de Lannoy had created and on the recently extended fortifications of the Travancore Lines.

For the time being Hyder Ali decided to leave Travancore alone and proceeded to the pacification of Malabar, where the Nairs were continuing guerrilla warfare. He built blockhouses at key points and, having left a garrison in Calicut and another at Madakkara, he went back over the mountains to Mysore before

17. Mavelikara:
a 10th-century
statue of Buddha

18. Sultan's Battery:
a Jain temple,
built in the ninth
century

19. Cranganore:
the oldest mosque
in Kerala

20. A Malayali penitent:
the heavy, ornate
structure he balances
on his shoulders
is called a *kaladi*

the monsoons rendered travel difficult in a country which was then almost without roads. It was of this difficulty of communication that the Nairs took advantage as soon as the rains began, and at the end of June there was a general uprising throughout Malabar. The blockhouses, cut off from each other and from outside aid by flooding rivers, were reduced, and when Raza Khan marched in from Coimbatore to suppress the rebellion his forces were harassed and surrounded. Hyder Ali himself, with a large army of native troops and some 300 European mercenaries, went to their aid. He met the Nairs entrenched at Vettat Putiyannadi. At first the battle was indecisive, and Hyder Ali was only saved from defeat by the daring assault of the small company of Europeans who stormed over the ditch and breached the Nair stockade. Victory was followed by a great manhunt of the Nairs, and the condition of Malabar at this time was portrayed vividly by a Moslem historian favourable to Hyder Ali.

> Wherever he turned he found no opponent, nor even any human creature: every inhabited place was forsaken, and the poor inhabitants who fled to the woods and mountains in the most inclement weather had the anguish of beholding their houses in flames, their fruit trees cut down, their cattle destroyed and their temples burnt. The perfidy of the Nairs had been too great for them to trust the offers of pardon made by Hyder by means of the Brahmins he despatched into the woods and mountains to recall these unhappy people, who were hanged without mercy and whose wives and children were reduced to slavery whenever they were found in the woods by the soldiers of Hyder.

Many of those who escaped death were transported to colonies in Mysore, where the conditions were so bad that out of 15,000 only 200 survived to return home.

Hyder Ali tried to consolidate his rule by issuing decrees forbidding the Nairs to bear arms, and relentlessly punished those who did so. He also ordered that Nairs should bow down before outcastes. Whatever their faults, both Hyder Ali and his son and successor Tippu Sultan were sincerely shocked by the aberrations of caste in Kerala, which offended their Moslem concep-

tions of the equality of men before God. Hyder Ali announced that all Nairs who accepted conversion to Islam would regain their rights and privileges. Some accepted, and many members of the lower castes were converted; in this way Islam first appeared in the Malabar countryside, and the class of agrarian Moplahs or converted Moslems was created.

Having established a peace of death and desertion over large parts of inland Malabar, Hyder Ali then returned to Mysore, but almost immediately afterwards became embroiled with the Mahrattas, and then with the British. Through their contacts with the East India Company in Tellicherry, the chieftains of north Malabar were aware of the current of events, and in 1767, provided with British arms, they rose again, harassing the Moslem garrisons on every possible occasion, until in December 1768 Hyder Ali withdrew his forces in return for a large monetary payment from the princes of Kerala and an assurance that his protégé, the Ali Raja, would go unmolested. The strategically important fortress of Palghat he retained.

By 1773 Hyder Ali had fended off the various threats to his kingdom, and after the monsoons that year he sent a new army down through the passes of Wynad into Malabar. The reigning Zamorin, having no intention of repeating his predecessor's self-immolation, fled to Travancore, and the country was reoccupied with almost no resistance from the Nairs. Hyder Ali now turned towards the south. His ultimate aim was the conquest of Travancore, and he began with the invasion of Cochin, which lay in his path. His commander Sirdar Khan occupied Trichur, but ran into difficulties at the Travancore Lines, and when the Raja of Cochin offered him a large bribe Hyder Ali agreed to withdraw his forces. There was also fighting with the Dutch, from whom Hyder Ali demanded the surrender of the fortress of Cranganore as the property of the Zamorin, but this was indecisive, and no way was opened for the Mysore forces into Travancore.

The relative calm which had greeted Hyder Ali's invasion of 1773 broke down in 1778. The Nairs began to rebel, encouraged by the East India Company. War had broken out between

England and France, and the Company decided that this was an excellent opportunity to stamp out French trading on the Malabar Coast. For the first time a considerable British force was landed, including a European battalion and three companies of artillery, while arms and ammunition were supplied to the Zamorin and the Raja of Kottayam who joined the rebellion.[1] Mahé was captured from the French, to be returned a few years later, and the Kolathiri Raja, who as their ally had attacked Tellicherry, was forced to retreat.

Having achieved these immediate objectives, the East India Company cooled to the idea of supporting a general insurrection, and for the time being the Keralan princes had to fight their own battle against Hyder Ali's forces. Within two years, however, war had broken out in the Carnatic between Hyder Ali and the Company, and Tellicherry was besieged by the Mysorean general Sirdar Khan. The Raja of Kottayam attacked the Mysore army from the rear while a reinforced British contingent under Major Abington sailed out from Tellicherry. Caught between the two, Sirdar Khan was defeated, and Major Abington marched on Calicut, which fell in February 1782. Colonel Humberstone now arrived to take over control of the Company's army, and advanced into the interior towards Palghat, the last remaining Mysorean stronghold in Kerala. Meanwhile, in an effort to reverse his defeats, Hyder Ali had despatched an army of 7,000 men under Mukhdam Sahib, which encountered Humberstone at Tirurangadi on April 8th; in the pitched battle that followed Mukhdam Sahib was killed and his army routed. Humberstone returned to the coast because of the rains, but afterwards he again advanced on Palghat. Before he reached the fortress he was attacked by a new Mysore army which had crossed the mountains under the command of Hyder Ali's son, Tippu Sultan, and he retreated once again by forced march to the coast, where he handed over command to the newly arrived Colonel McLeod, who fought an indecisive battle with Tippu on 7th December 1782. A few days later the news

[1] This is the state of Kottayam in north Malabar, not the town of the same name which is the centre of the Syrian Christians in Travancore.

reached Malabar that Hyder Ali had died in Mysore, and Tippu Sultan hastened back to secure his succession. Malabar was cleared of the Mysorean forces and by the end of 1783 Palghat was finally captured by a British column.

But all these triumphs were unavailing so far as the people of Malabar were concerned, since in concluding peace with Tippu Sultan next year at Mangalore the British abandoned their claims in the area and betrayed 'the Rajas or Zamindars of the Kerala coast' by allowing the inclusion of a clause declaring these former associates to be the 'friends and allies' of the ruler of Mysore, a tacit admission of Tippu's suzerainty which left him free to do as he liked in Malabar. At first he placed the region under the governorship of Arshad Beg Khan, a Moslem of great integrity and humane feelings who did his best to conciliate the Malayalis and to establish an efficient administration. Even the Keralan historians pay tribute to Arshad Beg Khan, but his good work was undone by Tippu's appointment of Mir Ibrahim as military governor. Mir Ibrahim's arbitrary exactions aroused so much resentment that even the Moplahs joined the Nairs in rebellion. Arshad Beg Khan appealed to Tippu Sultan, who in January 1788 led a large army through the Ghats to Calicut.

Unlike his father, Tippu was a man of some education, with a puritan reformer's mind tinged by his association with the French.[1] He set about reorganizing the administration, established a new capital of Farukhabad on the site of the present town of Feroke eight miles from Calicut, and began to build the first road system in Malabar. But most of all he was interested in social and moral reform. He was genuinely moved by the condition of the lower castes and incensed by the pretensions of the Brahmins and Nairs. He investigated the conditions of the farmers and, with a generosity that was as characteristic as his brutality, he remitted a third of the tax which had hitherto been payable, but accompanied this act by a moralistic proclamation against the marriage customs of the Nairs which ended with an ominous threat:

[1] In later years he was even to set up a Tree of Liberty in his capital of Seringapatam!

> Hereafter you must . . . dwell quietly and pay your dues like good subjects; and since it is the practice with you for one woman to associate with ten men, and you leave your mothers and sisters unconstrained in their obscene practices, and are thence all born in adultery, and are more shameless in your connections than the beasts of the field, I hereby require you to forsake these sinful practices and to be like the rest of mankind; and if you are disobedient of these commands, I have made repeated vows to honour the whole of you with Islam.

Tippu boasted that as a result of his proclamation many Hindus 'spontaneously' accepted conversion, and while this may have been true, they were almost certainly outcastes who welcomed the opportunity of escaping from their social disabilities. Among Brahmins the threat of forcible conversion aroused a mass panic; 30,000 of them fled to Travancore. Among the Nairs it produced resentment; after Tippu Sultan had gone home that summer to avoid the monsoons, the inevitable revolt broke out, and in November Calicut was besieged by the insurgents. An army sent from Mysore under the French General Lally failed to make any progress, and early in 1789 Tippu himself again appeared, to establish a reign of terror, desecrating and destroying the temples, and hunting down the Nairs. Though some Moslem historians have tried to deny it, there appear to have been forcible mass circumcisions of those who were captured. The rest lived as best they could in the woods and the mountains until Tippu's ambition overreached itself.

Tippu had long resented the willingness of Travancore to grant a refuge to the Malabar chieftains, and, according to the political customs of the time, he had two good excuses for intervention. First, the Travancore Lines were built, and garrisoned by Travancore troops, on the territory of the Raja of Cochin who had accepted Mysorean suzerainty. Secondly, going against the advice of the East India Company, the Dharma Raja had bought from the Dutch the forts of Pallipuram and Cranganore, which also lay in Cochin territory. Tippu demanded the surrender of Cranganore, the demolition of the Travancore Lines

and the expulsion of the Malabar chieftains. The Dharma Raja refused, and on the 29th December 1789, Tippu attacked the Travancore Lines. Though he breached a weakly fortified part of the Lines, he was eventually repulsed, and withdrew to await reinforcements and siege equipment from Mysore. Meanwhile the Dharma Raja gathered an army of 100,000 men, probably the largest that ever operated in Kerala, to defend his fortifications.

It was not until April 12th that Tippu opened his major assault on the Travancore Lines, with a heavy artillery bombardment followed by an assault through the wide breaches that had been blown in the ramparts. The Travancore soldiers, consisting partly of local Nairs and partly of mercenaries from the Madras region, were completely demoralized by the fierceness of the attack, and fled, deserting the Lines, which Tippu's forces destroyed, and the fort at Cranganore, which he occupied. For the first time the people of Cochin felt the violence of Tippu's ruthless warfare, and the Christians in particular were persecuted and their churches destroyed. Owing to the indecisively neutralist policy followed by John Holland, the Governor of Madras, the auxiliaries provided by the East India Company took no part in the fighting because they had received no instructions, and it seemed as if the way were open for the total subjugation of Travancore.

Two circumstances saved the state from a devastation comparable to that which Malabar had undergone. The monsoons broke and slowed down the advance, and at the same time the news reached Tippu that the British Governor General, Lord Cornwallis, had concluded an alliance with the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Mahrattas against him. Cornwallis had already recognized that the conquest of Travancore would be intolerable to British interests, and had reversed the neutralist policy, instructing the Company's officers at Tellicherry to regard themselves as at war with Tippu, and replacing Holland in Madras by General Meadows. At soon as he realized the magnitude of the alliance ranged against him, Tippu abandoned his campaign in Travancore and hurried back to Mysore to prepare his defences.

This was the virtual end of the Mysorean intervention in Kerala. The Company's forces entered Malabar, where they were joined by the chieftains who had formerly led the resistance to Tippu. The strategically important border stronghold of Palghat fell in September 1790, and the fortresses on the coast were captured by a column moving northward from Cranganore. The remnant of the Mysorean armies gathered under Martab Khan, and on December 10th a second battle was fought at Tiruran-gadi; once again the Mysoreans were defeated with heavy losses and Martab Khan fled with the vestige of his forces. Meanwhile General Abercrombie had landed at Tellicherry and on December 16th captured Cannanore. The remaining strongholds held by Mysorean troops and local Moplahs fell quickly, and by the beginning of 1791 the British were masters of Malabar, which, with the exception of Wynad, was ceded to the Company by the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792.

The Treaty of Seringapatam left the East India Company sovereign over Malabar and suzerain over the native states of Cochin and Travancore, which emerged from the war with their territories intact. In spite of the defeat it had suffered in April 1790, Travancore was virtually unharmed, and Cochin had suffered little until the very end from the rulers of Mysore who, whatever their other faults, dealt generously with those who accepted their overlordship and paid tribute regularly.

Malabar, on the other hand, was politically and economically shattered, and from that time to the present it has remained the poorest and the most restless region of Kerala. The wealth which its inhabitants had accumulated during two millennia of the spice trade was extorted from them by Hyder Ali, Tippu Sultan and their military and civil representatives. Large numbers of the Hindu population had fled either to Travancore or into the mountain jungles, great areas of cultivated land had reverted to waste, and in many places the pepper gardens were irremediably destroyed. Even the Moplahs, despite their privileges, did not prosper greatly, for Tippu's state monopoly of pepper ruined their business as traders and shipbuilders. The authority of the local Hindu princes had been broken, and the administrative

apparatus which the Zamorin and the lesser rulers had traditionally maintained was destroyed; thus the immediate result of Tippu's defeat and of the recovery of local authority by the Rajas was a chaos in few respects better than the tyranny from which the country had been freed. It was described thus by Murdoch Brown, one of the Company's officials in Malabar.

> . . . this province, at the time it was ceded, had really no form of Government, and required a new system to be framed for its use. The feudal system was broken; and no other kind of administration was known to the Rajas who laid claim to their respective districts, than that which they had exercised or witnessed under Haider, and which was a compound of corruption and extortion. To these men, however, the most unfit that could have been selected, was the whole authority of Government over the natives entrusted. Two evils of great magnitude were the consequence of this measure: the extortions and corruptions of the preceding administrations were continued; while the ancient feudal institutions were revived, and all the Nairs thereby attached to the different chieftains, and these again to the Rajas. Nothing could exceed the despotic rapaciousness of these men, to oppose whom there was no barrier; for it is well known, that none of the inhabitants dare complain against a Raja, whatever injuries they may have sustained, assassination being a certain follower of complaint. It is not surprising, that under such rulers agriculture did not flourish, and that the fields now cultivated (which in some districts bear but a small proportion to those that are waste) should yield but very indifferent crops.
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> Allowing for exaggeration, since not all the Malabar chieftains were as rapacious as Brown suggests and not everywhere were the people in constant fear of death as the penalty for the expression of discontent, these remarks do portray in general the state of Malabar immediately after the Mysorean occupation. For such a condition the East India Company was in part to blame. When Malabar was ceded to them, there were two main courses that might have been followed, with a number of intermediate variants. The Company could either hand back the

sovereignty of Malabar to its princes, or it could rule the territory directly. Its officers began by choosing an ambiguous course between these two extremes.

By the Treaty of Seringapatam the Company held sovereign powers over Malabar, and it decided to retain them; this left open the question of what rights the rajas and chieftains would be granted under the new dispensation. At first the Company decided to assess a tax or tribute for each principality and to hold the local ruler responsible for collecting it; if he succeeded, the Company would not interfere in his administration, provided the pepper monopoly which it had inherited from Tippu were not infringed. Arrangements of this kind were worked out with all the lesser rajas, and finally, with reluctance, the Zamorin agreed to a treaty under which he would lease from the Company his own hereditary domain, and in return would retain judicial authority over the lesser rulers, with the further face-saving proviso that revenues due from certain other rajas would be paid through his treasury. Some of the lesser princes of the Zamorin's family refused to accept this diminution of authority, and one of them, the most violent in his demands for a declaration of independence from the British, was imprisoned and died on the same day, presumably by his own hand.

The arrangements worked out by the Company's Commissioners with the individual rajas provided that the princely families be granted a compensation for whatever traditional rights they might lose. In short, they became pensioners, and in this respect the Company appears to have dealt generously, for even the Indian historian Pannikar admits that 'the Commission proceeded on the inquiry with a sense of fairness and equity, the conclusive proof of which may be seen in the fact that both the families concerned and the population accepted the decisions which were the bases of the social configuration of British Malabar till the very end of the British rule'.

The difficulties arose over the revenue which the Company expected to receive from the princes. This was assessed too high for a land that had undergone a quarter of a century of war and general devastation, and the lesser chieftains were unable to pay

the rajas the tribute due from their lands, even though many fell into debt to the Tamil Brahmins and the Konkanis who at this time began to prosper as money-lenders, a calling previously almost unknown in Kerala. Finally, in 1796, the Company took over direct collection of revenues in the Zamorin's domains, but even then found it impossible to gather the amounts assessed, and in the end abolished entirely the practice of farming taxes to the princes, and placed revenue administration in the hands of its own officers, who had already taken over judicial functions. By 1800 the logic of events was recognized, the princes lost their remaining shreds of power, and Malabar became a British district, administered by a Principal Collector under the Madras authorities; its status remained unchanged, even after Indian independence, until in 1956 it was finally incorporated into the state of Kerala.

After the brief resistance within the Zamorin's family, only one Malabar prince refused to accept the British settlement. He was Kerala Varma, prince of Kottayam, a fine poet whose Kathakali dramas are still performed, and a fierce opponent of foreign domination in any form. Kerala Varma had been more persistent than any of the other native rulers in his opposition to Tippu, and when General Abercrombie landed at Tellicherry in 1790 he joined him with his guerrilla army of Nairs from the mountains. Undoubtedly he hoped that a British victory would reinstate the old feudal order in Malabar, and as soon as he saw that this was not to be so, and that the princes would become mere landlords drawing pensions from the British, he refused to submit. When his uncle, the Raja of Kurumbranad, as senior member of his line, accepted a revenue settlement that embraced Kottayam, Kerala Varma rejected it. The British destroyed his palace, and he fled to the mountainous region of Wynad which was part of his hereditary domain. This was the part of Malabar that remained in Tippu's hands under the Treaty of Seringapatam, but after his final defeat it fell to the British as their share in the partition of Mysore. Kerala Varma resisted this settlement and, supported by the formidable archers of the Kurichiya tribe, fought a bitter jungle war, which lasted for five

years from 1800 to 1805. The Pazhassi Raja, as he is called in Malabar popular legend from the district of Wynad which was his real stronghold, became one of the most stubborn adversaries whom the British commander—Arthur Wellesley, future Duke of Wellington—ever encountered. But the better-equipped forces of the Company slowly encircled Kerala Varma's levies of Nairs and tribesmen, and on the 30th November 1805, he was finally killed in a skirmish near Sultan's Battery.

After the Pazhassi Raja's death none of the princes took up the cause he had defended. The continuing resistance to the British in Malabar came from the Moslem peasants, discontented with the return of the Brahmin landlords who had fled from Tippu; once they regained their possessions, these Jenmis proceeded to oppress those who had accepted conversion, to the extent of refusing them land for mosques and cemeteries. From 1836 to 1898 the peace of Malabar was disturbed by a series of Moplah violences which ranged from individual assassinations of Nambudiri landlords to small insurrections; to deal with them the Malabar Special Police was formed during the 1850s as a semi-military occupation force. (It is still in existence in modern Kerala, even though India has become independent.) The Moplah outbreaks did not finally die down until after the Logan Commission of 1881 had reached the conclusion that the unrest was due to agrarian distress rather than to religious fanaticism, and had recommended a series of measures intended to mitigate the plight of the tenant farmers of northern Kerala.

Relations between the British and the two native states, Cochin and Travancore, followed somewhat different courses. Cochin, having been tributary to Tippu, merely transferred that relationship to the British under a treaty concluded in 1791. Any influence the Dutch may have wielded in Cochinese affairs had ended decades before when they chose to become neutral in the face of the rising power of Travancore and failed to support Cochin at the battle of Ambalapuzha. In any case the importance of both the Dutch and the French on the Malabar Coast diminished rapidly during the 1780s when they became more or less passive spectators of large-scale British intervention against

Tippu. The growing British power encouraged Cochinese hostility to the Dutch, whose sphere of influence had shrunk to Cochin Fort, Vypeen Island and the forts of Cranganore and Pallipuram. The Dutch still claimed to be protectors of the Latin Christians and the Konkani Brahmins who had settled in the area as merchants, and it was over the Konkanis that open hostilities finally broke out with the Cochinese. The Raja Rama Varma, who began to rule in 1790, was a brilliant but rapacious man, obsessed with the idea of increasing royal power in Cochin as Martanda Varma had done in Travancore.

> As he was a brave and enterprising man, possessed of considerable talents and no small share of pride, [said the Carmelite Fra Bartolomeo] he could not bear the idea of being satisfied with the income enjoyed by his predecessors. He therefore exercised every kind of oppression against the merchants . . . plundered the shops and carried away the merchants' property.

These merchants were the Konkanis, whose descendants to this day occupy the narrow lane of shops and warehouses that runs down from Fort Cochin towards the palace at Mattancherri. Since the Konkanis were their protégés, the Dutch attacked the palace with six field cannon and a mixed force of Europeans, Malays, and local mercenaries, but they were driven back, and only with difficulty did the East India Company's agent dissuade the Raja from mounting a major assault on the Fort. Four years later it was the British themselves who attacked Fort Cochin. Holland had been conquered by Napoleon, and the Stadtholder, a refugee in England, issued a proclamation to all Dutch commandants overseas ordering them to allow British troops to occupy their forts so as to keep them out of French hands. The East India Company was quick to use the proclamation to its own advantage. Early in the autumn of 1795 a large British force appeared off the island of Vypeen to demand the surrender of Fort Cochin. Van Spall, the Dutch Governor, refused, and the fort was besieged until its capitulation on December 19th. So ended the Dutch age on the Malabar Coast.

If the British were now overlords of Cochin and masters of

its commerce through their possession of the Fort, their status in Travancore was more nebulous. Through ancient titles which had proceeded from the Nayaks of Madurai through the Nawabs of Arcot, the East India Company held a shadowy suzerainty over the principality. A treaty concluded in 1795 guaranteed Travancore against external aggression, but it did not specifically confer on the Company any right of internal interference, though in 1800 a Resident, Colonel Macaulay, was appointed to both of the Keralan native states and immediately began to play an active advisory role.

The internal affairs of Travancore were by now in extreme disorder. On the accession in 1798 of a 16-year-old Raja, Balarama Varma, the state fell into the hands of a clique of corrupt administrators who used their position to plunder the treasury and to practise open extortion. Among those from whom forced payments were demanded was a Nair landowner, Velu Thampi, who asked for three days to return to his home and raise the money. Instead he raised the countryside of southern Travancore and marched on Trivandrum at the head of an insurgent army. When he camped outside the Fort, the people of the city rose to arms and joined him. The Raja immediately agreed to dismiss and punish the corrupt ministers, and the Nair leaders took their places. Shortly afterwards, on the advice of Colonel Macaulay, Velu Thampi was appointed Dalawa or Dewan, and immediately started on far-reaching reforms, aimed at strengthening the central government and putting in order the state finances. A cut in the pay of the army provoked a mutiny and this was crushed only with the assistance of the Company's forces, called in at Velu Thampi's request. The price of this assistance was a new Treaty, signed in 1805, by which the Raja specifically accepted British protection, agreed to pay a tribute of 800,000 rupees a year, and promised to be guided by whatever advice the Company's representatives might give him in anything to do with the internal administration of the state.

The Treaty marked the virtual end of Travancore's political independence. Velu Thampi, who had originally been on the best of terms with Colonel Macaulay, found that the British

Resident used his power under the 1805 Treaty to interfere immoderately in the internal policy, and became oppressively insistent in his demands for payment of tribute. The friendship between the two men vanished, and Velu Thampi began to plot with the Paliath Achan, hereditary chief minister of Cochin, who had similar grievances. They established secret communication with the French on Mauritius and appear to have been promised the support of an invading force which would land in the middle of January 1809. The conspiring ministers, who distrusted the French as much as the British, decided to strike immediately and to use the French forces (which in fact never put in an appearance) as auxiliaries in case, after the success they anticipated, a British army were sent to re-invade their countries.

The revolt began when the Paliath Achan attacked the Residency at Cochin, in the hope of capturing Colonel Macaulay. The Cochinese overpowered the guards, but Macaulay eluded them and escaped to a British ship which had just entered the harbour. Meanwhile in Travancore Velu Thampi had issued a call to arms known in Keralan history as the Kundara Proclamation. It is an interesting document, since it shows the essentially traditionalist background of the rebellion, its concern for the maintenance of social forms and particularly for the safety of the caste system.

> It is the nature of the English nation to get possession of countries by treacherous means, and should they obtain ascendancy in Travancore, they will put their own guards in the palace, Sircar buildings, and the fort gates, destroy the royal seal, do away with honorific palanquins, and other distinguishing marks, suppress the Brahminical communities and worship in temples, make monopolies of salt and every other thing, measure up and assert themselves absolute owners of waste lands, impose exorbitant taxes on paddy lands, coconut trees, etc., get low-caste people to inflict heavy punishments for slight faults, put up crosses and Christian flags in temples, compel intermarriages with Brahmin women without reference to caste or creed, and practise all the unjust and unlawful things which characterize Kaliyuga.

Let us therefore exert outselves to keep off impending calamities such as those we have sketched above, and endeavour as far as lies in our power that no disparagement may be imputed to us in guarding our homes, the charitable institutions, and the manners and customs of our land.

It was a skilfully conceived appeal. As people in Travancore must have learnt at least by rumour, the British had indeed destroyed most of the privileges of the princes in Malabar, but up to this time they had never interfered either with religious practices or with the caste system anywhere in India, and here Velu Thampi was cleverly playing on memories of the Mysore invasion and of Tippu's policies. The Nairs flocked in thousands to join him, and, marching north from Trivandrum, the Travancore forces met the British at Quilon; they were defeated. Meanwhile, reinforcements landed at Fort Cochin and drove out the Paliath Achan. A long, unsuccessful siege of the Fort exhausted the Cochinese morale, and when Colonel Macaulay made an offer of friendship or all-out war the Paliath Achan agreed to give up the struggle, provided he would be treated honourably. He surrendered on February 27th, and was sent to live in Madras, never to set foot in Kerala again.

Deserted by his ally, Velu Thampi resolved to refuse surrender. A British army force from Madras forced the Aramboly Pass, captured the old capital of Padmanabhapuram, and marched on Trivandrum. The Raja sued for peace, and Velu Thampi fled. Eventually, after many days of fugitive wandering, he was surrounded in the house of a Brahmin at Mannadi and killed himself rather than fall alive into the hands of his enemies. His body was hanged on a gibbet in Trivandrum, and many of his followers were captured and executed.

With the death of Velu Thampi the old order of Kerala virtually came to an end, and a century of intensive transition began. Henceforward the British paramountcy over the native states was secure, though under Macaulay's successors, beginning with the generous and enlightened Colonel Munro, who actually served for brief periods as Dewan for both Travancore and Cochin, interference was unobtrusive and tactful, tending

to disappear as educated Indians took over the administration of the states and the rulers themselves developed a liberal attitude towards social reform which was to make the two Keralan principalities quite exceptional among the native kingdoms of India.

Modern Indian historians, who talk of the Indian Mutiny as a War of Liberation, are inclined to portray men like the Pazhazzi Raja and Velu Thampi as the precursors of the 20th-century struggle for independence. Even the Keralan Communist leader, A. K. Gopalan, has described their activities as 'the first national revolt against the English'. In fact, these feudal noblemen had no conception of an Indian nation, and they were fighting not for the future but for the past. One may admire their bravery and spirit, one may sympathize with their desire to live as they had always lived and to endure no interference from aliens with different cultures. But, when all is said, they looked back to a feudal order, to a rigid caste system, to a restrictive society dominated by Brahmins and Nairs. For the submerged half of their society they had little feeling; even Tippu Sultan was superior to them in this respect. Far from representing India's 1789, they stood for its 1745.

The real movement for Indian independence and nationhood was to come through contact with the West, not through isolation, and its harbingers in Kerala were neither social nor political revolutionaries. They were educators, and if one seeks the date which in Kerala marks most clearly the beginning of the shift from the traditional towards the modern world, it is probably 1815, the year when, with the encouragement of Colonel Munro, the Metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox Church founded the Old Seminary in Kottayam. 'Within these very walls it all began, for here English was first taught in Kerala,' said Father Philippos, the bearded, black-robed Vice-Principal, as he led me through the whitewashed cloisters of the little college isolated in its coconut grove on the outskirts of the holy city of Keralan Christians. Shortly after the Seminary was opened, three Church Missionary Society representatives arrived in Kottayam. Their religious teachings set going a chain reaction

of schisms within the Syrian Church, but in compensation Joseph Fenn, who became Principal of the Seminary, introduced teaching in English and with it the whole world of expanding knowledge that the English language brought to a society previously nurtured on the rich but archaic literature of Sanskrit. At the same time his colleague, Henry Bailey, established the first printing press in Kerala. These innovations enabled a modern culture to emerge parallel with the traditional Keralan culture which reached its apogee by the end of the 18th century. To the arts that have been the finest and the most enduring productions of that native culture I shall devote the next chapter, before proceeding to discuss the rapidly changing Kerala of the 19th and 20th centuries.

PART IV

GODS AND HEROES

10

Tales of Gods and Heroes: An Interlude on the Traditional Arts of Kerala

NOWHERE does one find the traditional arts of Kerala so well or so comprehensively preserved as in the dance drama called Kathakali, which is still performed frequently in the temple yards for the benefit of the populace. Not that Kathakali is in any sense a folk art. It began in the courts of princes, and to this day it is performed mainly by members of the higher castes, Nairs and Ambalavasis. But, unlike certain other dramatic dances in Kerala, such as the Bhadrakali Pattu, which is danced to propitiate the goddess Kali and is reserved to Brahmins and Kshatriyas, Kathakali is performed for all to see. Its stories are taken not from the Vedas, which in Kerala are regarded as the exclusive province of the Nambudiris, but from the mass of epic and Puranic literature which is available to all Hindus; from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and from the great Vaishnavite cycles of the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita Govinda*. For Keralans the Kathakali dramas retell the stories of the gods and heroes in a language of words and signs which is intimately familiar to them, and they embrace, even more thoroughly than European opera, all the arts of the Malayali culture, arts developed under the influence of Aryan infiltration yet so combined with primeval Dravidian elements and so adapted to the local temperament that a Kathakali performance seen in the open air, as the long tropical night unfolds the tale and draws it to an end with the first glimmering of dawn, is one of the Keralan experiences that cannot be matched anywhere else in India.

After twilight has fallen, the drums begin to beat their prelude, and the people gather. No one is turned away. Even non-Hindus are not only welcomed but are even offered special seats beside the dancing space, where they become part of the entertainment for the hundreds of people who sit on the sandy ground of the temple yard, the white-clad men to the left, the women in their brilliant skirts and blouses to the right, and the children in front, all of them prepared to spend the long night watching the slow, impressive drama that will be enacted in that bare place without scenery in the light of a great brass lamp whose flickering flame will add to the mystery of the performance and accentuate with its great shadows the grandeur of the mythical characters.

The Kathakali dramas, though they are based on Sanskrit tales, are original poetic compositions, many of them ranking among the greatest works of Malayalam literature. They are divided into slokas or verses, which narrate the story, and padams, or songs, which embody the dialogue of the characters. They are sung, in a slow style called Sopana which is peculiar to Kerala, by two musicians who stand at the back of the stage, bare-torsoed and clad in white mundus draped in peculiarly classic folds. The leading singer, the Ponnani, is the most important person in a Kathakali drama, since he is not only the main narrator, but also the director of the performance, choosing beforehand the parts which the various actors will render, regulating the pace of the performance, and keeping time by beating on the Chengala, a thick gong of bell-metal. His assistant, the Sankiti, supports the rhythm with a pair of small cymbals, and relieves the Ponnani by repeating the verses when this is necessitated by the action's lagging behind the pace of the chant.

Instrumental music for Kathakali is provided by the two drummers, temple musicians of one of the Ambalavasi castes. The leader of these is the Chendakkaran, who plays with two curved sticks the deep-toned Chenda, a cylindrical wooden drum. The accompanying instrument, the Maddhalam, is a small-headed drum, bellying at the centre like an elongated keg; the Maddhalakkaran plays it at both ends with fingers protected

by hard tips of glue-bound cloth, and its softer tone comes into prominence during the action of the female characters.

It is usually the music of the Maddhallam that opens a Kathakali performance, with the Chenda joining in afterwards in a duet in which the two drummers give the audience a foretaste of their virtuosity. The singers chant the prelude to the play, and then two men appear, as nondescriptly ordinary as the scene shifters in a Chinese opera, and hold up between them a splendidly embroidered curtain of brightly coloured silk, usually with some motif like a sun in its centre. Now it is time for the Nayaka, or central character of the play, to make his appearance. At first all that can be glimpsed above the curtain is the towering, carved and painted wooden headdress, encrusted with tiny coloured mirrors and iridescent beetle wings glimmering in the lamplight, and below the curtain the prehensile-looking feet of the actor, with their belled anklets. Still concealed in his improvised sanctum, the Nayaka performs the ceremonial dance to propitiate the tutelary deity, and then, facing the audience, who have been waiting for this moment with tense though familiar expectancy, he gradually lowers the curtain with his hands until he stands revealed in the full fantasy of his costume and make-up, Krishna or Arjuna, Rama or Nala, a celestial being or an epic hero whose dress and colouring make him as dramatically different from earthly men as the paintings of deities on the walls of Keralan temples and palaces.

The appearance of the actor delineates both the name and the nature of the character he represents, so that a connoisseur can tell at sight which deity or legendary warrior is beginning to dance out the story before him. The gilded and jewelled headdresses worn by avatars differ in shape from those of mere heroes, and these again from the crowns of rishis or sages. Celestials and heroes alike wear elaborate costumes of long-sleeved tunics with jewelled breast-plates, pleated crinoline-like skirts and dangling stoles ending in mirrors.

But the most striking element in the appearance of the Kathakali actor is the symbolic make-up which replaces the painted masks that were worn in early Keralan forms of drama. Each

character has his special facial pattern, determined by tradition. For a noble character, such as Arjuna or Nala, the basic colour will be a lustrous green; for a sage it will be a kind of apricot yellow; in the face of a passionate, demoniac being red will predominate, and in that of a depraved character, like Duryodhana, the villainous prince of the *Mahabharata*, black will prevail. The forehead will bear coloured motifs, the eyebrows will be blackened and enlarged and the eyes heavily rimmed, the mouth emphasized by red and black outlines. Protuberances of a white composition of lime and powdered rice will be built up on the face: in the case of evil characters a round knob at the end of the nose and spikes on the brow, in the case of heroes and avatars a ribbed, beard-like fringe starting at the ears and passing under the chin, which frames the face and, as one Kathakali teacher remarked to me, 'makes it into a stage to display the changing emotions'. Certain make-ups are expressionistic rather than symbolic; for example, those of Hanuman, the monkey god, of Narasimha, the man-lion avatar of Vishnu, and of Hamsam, the golden goose in the story of Nala, seek to stress the animal characteristic of their originals. The dress and make-up of the female characters, who—as in the Japanese Kabuki—are always played by men, are much more naturalistic than those of the male characters.

The make-up of the performers in Kathakali is applied by hereditary artists, and occasionally one gets an opportunity to step behind the screen which marks off the makeshift green-room and to see the actors lying supine on their mats while the artists bend over them, painting and moulding their characters on to their faces with such elaborate care that it can take five hours to complete a single make-up. The final touch is the insertion under the eyelids of the seeds of a solanaceous plant which produce a reddening of the eyeball, whose fearsomeness in the flickering lamplight enhances the non-humanity of the character's general appearance; everything in him must be removed from the ordinary before he can interpret the superhuman.

Undoubtedly the most striking elements in the appearance of

the Kathakali performer, the great, glittering headdress and the coloured make-up, are derived from the iconographic conventions of Keralan painting; the crowns resemble those worn by deities in the mural paintings at Padmanabhapuram and Mattancherri, while the representation of the colourings of deities, demons and heroes as different from those of ordinary man is to be found in most Indian sacred painting. The costuming and make-up of the Kathakali actors in fact form the last surviving manifestation of the traditional pictorial arts of Kerala.

After the principal actor has revealed himself in all his superhuman splendour by the lowering of the curtain, the drama proper begins. The actors neither speak nor sing, but visually represent the story as it is unfolded by the singers. Kathakali is not a pure dance form. The word itself means story-play, and the actions of the performers combine the two arts of Nritha, or dance, and Abhinaya, or acting. The form of dance is the vigorous Tandava, represented so often in Indian art in the earth-shaking dance of Siva Nataraja, but the greater part of the performer's time and attention is really devoted to a highly formalized type of mime. Every action, every image, every emotion which appears in the poem as sung by the narrator must be represented either directly or figuratively by the actor, and this he does, not only by the motions of his limbs and body, as in ordinary dancing, but also by facial expressions, by movements of the eyes and neck, and by manual gestures—the mudras—all of which are established by tradition and understood by the aficionados of the art. The facial movements are intended to convey the nine emotions or rasas recognized in classical Indian drama—desire, valour and pathos, wonder, wrath and ridicule, fear, loathing and tranquillity. The manual gestures, which are made by one or both hands, are ninety-five in number, but each conveys a number of possible meanings, according to the context, so that in all they represent nearly five hundred images, a sufficient sign vocabulary to tell any of the great familiar stories.

While the singers are narrating the story or reproducing the dialogue of the characters, the actor must follow the text faithfully, but there are also interludes of soliloquy or pure action in

which he is free to improvise and to show, by original combinations of accepted signs, his native artistry. In these interludes the singers retire to rest, and it is the drummers who accompany the actor and have their own chance to demonstrate their abilities. Such moments are eagerly awaited by the audience, since these are the passages in which the extent of an actor's powers can be fully appreciated.

The Kathakali drama always proceeds at a leisurely pace, with long intervals of drumming between the scenes, but for the Keralans, as for other oriental peoples, this is the gait of drama. For the knowledgeable few the appeal of the play lies in the intricacy of gesture, but to the majority of the Indian audience this is little more comprehensible than it is to the inexperienced stranger, and for them the entertainment lies in the vividness of the poetry and the virtuosity of the musicians—and above all in the splendour of the strange and coloured figures enacting the ancient drama of gods and heroes in the fitful pattern of light and shadow from the great oil lamp which seems to give them a gigantic grandeur far exceeding their merely human stature.

Kathakali survives as an expressive combination of Keralan traditional arts, but also as the most recent and most popular of a whole series of ancient dramatic forms, many of which still survive in Kerala, where they were until recently performed under the patronage of temples or princes, and have since been preserved and fostered by local associations of connoisseurs in the larger towns, such as Trivandrum, Ernakulam and Calicut, and particularly by the Kerala Kalamandalam, the great state-supported dance academy founded in 1930 by the poet Vallathol in the village of Cherutheruthy near Trichur.

At the Kalamandalam, where almost all the modern Keralan dancers of any significance are trained, the students undergo a rigorous training in all aspects of native drama, in the case of Kathakali for eight years. They learn the music and the art of make-up, they become familiar not only with the Malayalam dramatic texts, but also with the great Sanskrit works on which they are based, and, after years of rigorous physical conditioning and training in method, they are expected to play most of the

characters in the recognized repertoire, without distinction of sex. for Kathakali differs from Kabuki in that there is no specialization in male or female roles. The accomplished Kathakali actor should be able to present Krishna one day and Radha the next with equal virtuosity.

In the Kalamandalam the students are taught in mud-floored palmleaf sheds scattered through the groves that surround the central theatre and dormitory building; these sheds are called kalaris, perpetuating the name given to the vanished gymnasia where in the feudal ages the Nair warriors were taught the arts of war. This survival indicates one of the two strains that have coalesced in the evolution of Kathakali. In part it is a development of Nair martial traditions. Duarte Barbosa observed in the 16th century that dancing was part of the normal training of a Nair youth, intended to increase his suppleness and sureness of movement as a sword-fighter. In the medieval kalaris, an entertainment called Shastrakali was performed at festivals in which propitiatory dances, comic interludes and formalized swordplay were combined. The martial aspect of Shastrakali has survived in the Velakali, the dance in which, at the great temple of Trivandrum, the descendants of the Nair warriors annually re-enact the legendary battle of the *Mahabharata*.

The other line of descent which appears in Kathakali is the tradition evolved by the Chakkiars, the caste of professional dancers who originated in the ancient Dravidian society before the Aryanization of Kerala, and who are mentioned already in the *Shilappadikaram*. The traditional performance of the Chakkiars was the Kuthu, a solo performance carried on in the temples, in which the actor recited the Puranic stories in Sanskrit, explaining them in Malayalam and illustrating them in mime. Later there developed a form of dance drama played by two or more Chakkiars, with musicians and female dancers from the Nambiars, another temple servant caste; this was called Kudiyattam, and was based on the classic Sanskrit dramas, once again accompanied by explanations in Malayalam.

Up to this point the Keralan dramatic dance based on sacred legends remained exclusive, performed in the mandapams or

dance halls within temple precints which were forbidden, because of caste rules, to the majority of Malayalis, who had their own folk dances which are still performed to this day at festivals like Onam. It was, ironically, through the desire for display on the part of the princes that the dance drama became an art to be enjoyed by the people.

During the 17th century and the first part of the 18th, when the power of the Portuguese had waned, the Keralan princes enjoyed their most prosperous and peaceful period, with few wars and a good income from the spice trade. Their lavish courts attracted musicians and poets; their warriors needed activities to occupy the long periods of leisure when they were not fighting, and so, like many other privileged castes in the world's history, the Nairs turned to the arts.

The cult of Krishna, which at the same period played such a decisive role in stimulating a phenomenal artistic activity in the courts of the Rajput princes of North India, provided the original stimulus for this movement among the Malayali nobility. During the 1650s a prince called Manaveda reigned for a brief period in Calicut. A dedicated Vaishnavite as well as an accomplished poet, this Zamorin is said to have been granted a vision of Krishna which implanted in his mind the idea of presenting in dramatic form the life of this god. At this time the *Gita Govinda*, the great cycle of Krishna poems written in the 11th century by the Bengali Jayadeva, had become extremely popular among the non-Brahminical higher castes of Kerala, and it seems that, quite apart from the vision he claimed, Manaveda was inspired by this poem when he wrote the *Krishna Giti*, a series of eight episodic poems to be performed dramatically on consecutive nights. A new form of dramatic dance, the Krishnattam, was devised to present the *Krishna Giti*. The costumes and headdresses of the actors were rather like those later used in Kathakali, but they wore painted wooden masks and relied entirely on bodily postures and manual gestures. At the same time, voice was detached from action, and a separate singer chanted the poem so that the actor could devote himself entirely to the elaboration of his mime.

The final step to Kathakali was taken in the same generation at the court of a rival prince, the Raja of Kottarakkara, who strove to emulate Manaveda by writing in his turn a cycle of dramatic poems about the life of Rama; he composed them in the curious hybrid literary language called 'pearl-coral' (Manipravalam), part Sanskrit and part Malayalam, which had been evolved by Keralan poets during the 13th century when they were breaking free of the literary tyranny of Sanskrit and Tamil. The form of dance drama devised to present the Raja of Kottarakkara's poems was called Ramanattam. Its most revolutionary departure from Krishnattam was the abandonment of the mask and the substitution of applied make-up which allowed facial expressions to reinforce the other elements of the mime. Quickly, with the substitution of Malayalam for Manipravalam, Ramanattam developed into Kathakali, and it spread rapidly through the courts of Kerala from Malabar to Travancore and also into the temples most frequented by the Nairs. The exclusive hold of the Chakkiars over the drama were broken; the Nairs took enthusiastically to the new form, and it gained so much honour that very often the leading role in a play would be danced and mimed by the commander of the Raja's armed forces. During the 18th century a great repertoire of poems was written for the Kathakali dramas, mainly by educated non-Brahmins, including many of the princes themselves, and some of these remain among the finest examples of traditional Malayalam literature. Probably the greatest of all is the *Nalacharitam*, the story of Nala, by the 18th century Ambalavasi poet Unnayi Warrier who lived at the court of Travancore under the patronage of Martanda Varma.

Two other forms of traditional dance are still performed by the Hindus in Kerala. One, as much the exclusive province of women as Kathakali is of men, is Mohini Attam, the Dance of the Enchantress. Superficially Mohini Attam resembles the Tamil classical dance, Bharat Natyam, but it is less sophisticated, less complex in its mime, and, in comparison, rustically vigorous and angular. It is a very ancient dance, originally practised by women of the Nambiar caste and associated with the temples;

outside the sanctuary of the 12th-century temple at Trivikramangalam (one of the few temples where we managed to talk our way into the inner precinct), I found relief carvings of sacred dancers who were obviously performing an early type of Mohini Attam. However, owing to its association with women who at times performed ritual prostitution, Mohini Attam fell into disrepute during the 19th century, and when the Kerala Kalamandalam attempted to revive it in recent years there was difficulty in finding women who would admit to a knowledge of it and come forward as teachers. Today it is a rather artificially nurtured art, rarely performed (we saw it only at the Kalamandalam itself), and sharing none of the wide popularity which still draws to Kathakali its great audiences.

Ottan Thullal, the other important surviving dance form among the Hindus, was invented in the 18th century by one of the most remarkable Malayalam poets, Kunchan Nambiar. The solo dancer, who is accompanied by two musicians, follows in the tradition of the village story-teller, and does not need a temple yard. He can put on his performance anywhere, singing,dancing and miming his poems, and alternating straight narration with vivid representations of the characters in dialogue. The Thullalkathas, the texts of Ottan Thullal, are really ballad dramas. Kunchan Nambiar wrote sixty of them, as full of social observation and criticism in their pointed asides as the *Canterbury Tales*. To this day, the strain of contemporary criticism persists in Ottan Thullal, and, though the frame of the story, as in Kunchan Nambiar's originals, is still derived from Puranic literature and concerns such familiar heroes as Krishna, Rama and Nala (a particular favourite with Malayalis), the actors are not above introducing topical references to recent events, rather in the manner of an English pantomime, which is always the same but always topical.

Only one of the many Keralan dramatic forms shows a European influence. This is the Christian popular drama known as Chavittunakatam, which was developed during the 17th century in the Cochin region. The most popular Chavittunakatam texts are those which tell of the mythical conflicts between

Charlemagne and Saladin. Since Charlemagne is not a hero of the Eastern Church, it seems probable that the thematic material of these dramas was derived from the Portuguese during the 16th century, particularly as the costumes are medievally European. On the other hand, the music is entirely Indian, and drumming is used to particularly dramatic effect during the scenes of battle between Moors and Christians. In Chavittunakatam the dialogue is spoken by the performers, who have an emphatic way of acting reinforced by thunderous stamping on specially built wooden platforms. The name Chavittunakatam, indeed, means Stamping-drama.

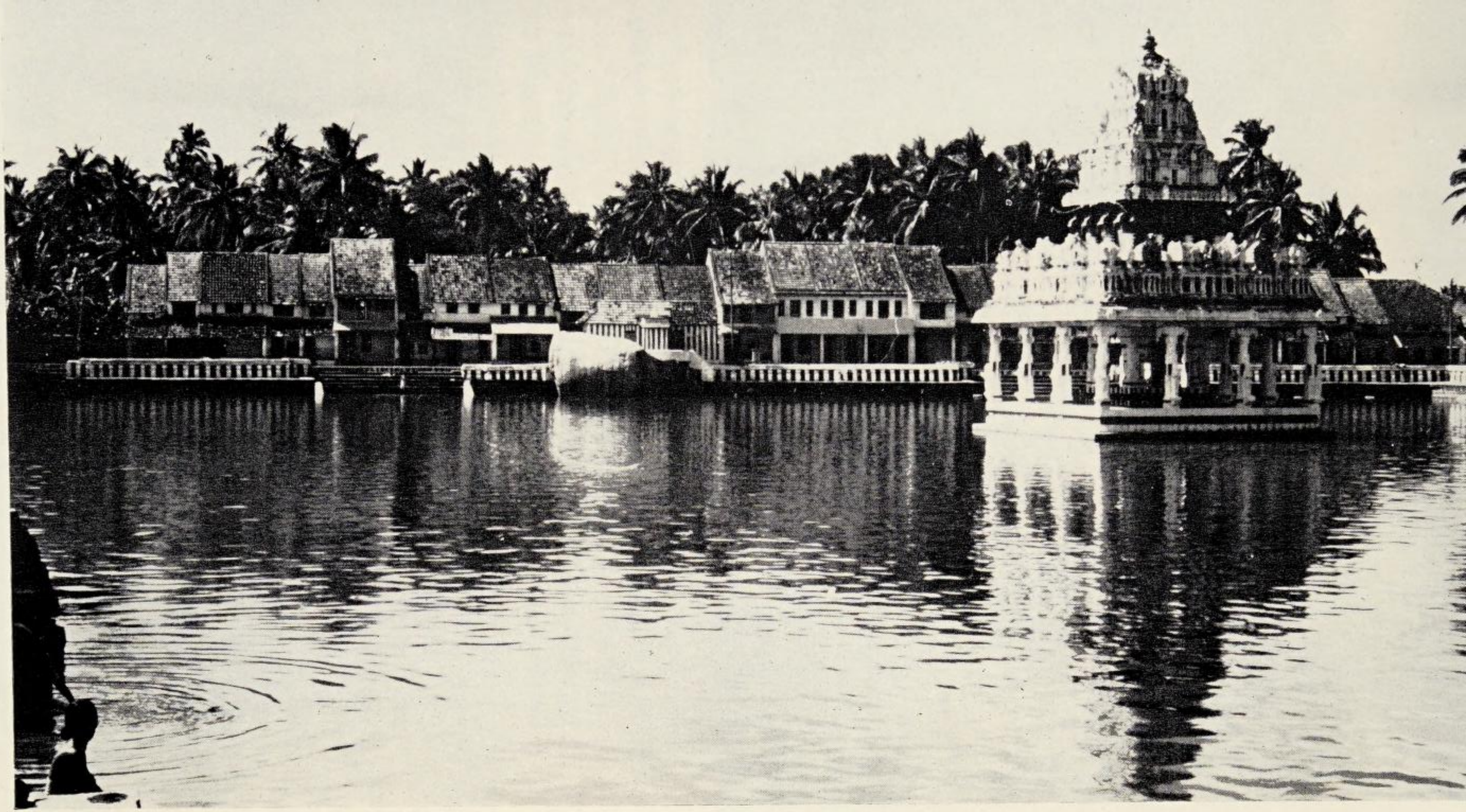
Most of the great names of Malayalam as distinct from Sanskrit literature in Kerala before the 19th century are associated with the various forms of drama, but there was also a considerable range of non-dramatic poetry. As a distinct written language, Malayalam began to appear in temple inscriptions during the early Middle Ages, but it is doubtful whether any existing literary work in the language dates from before the 13th century. Malayalam proper and Manipravalam (the literary hybrid of Sanskrit and Malayalam) appear to have come into use at roughly the same period. Manipravalam, though it continued to be used in dramatic composition up to the 17th century (and even today is spoken by the clown in performances of Kudiyattam), remained throughout an artificial, rather precious language, used chiefly for conventionalized amorous poems whose heroines were usually highly romanticized dancing girls. Work in Manipravalam remained closely tied to the Sanskrit models which its poets imitated; it was intended only for scholars who could appreciate its macaronic virtuosities.

Writing in Malayalam, on the other hand, was intended primarily for those who did not understand Sanskrit, and it soon began to show a curious mixture of dependence and autonomy. In subject matter it was almost entirely dependent. Indeed, one is astonished to realize how far—at this time when Malayalis began once again to write extensively in a Dravidian language—the pre-Aryan traditions had either vanished or had become so submerged that they could no longer be disentangled. Orally

transmitted chants and songs celebrating Dravidian gods like Aiyapan and the serpent deities had indeed survived (and survive to this day), but these had no influence on the formal literature in Malayalam that began to appear in the 13th century.

The earliest known poem in the language is the *Ramacharitam*, probably dating from the late 13th century, and this, as its name suggests, is a rendering into Malayalam of the familiar story of Rama. It was the first of many such works, half translation, half paraphrase, which appeared during the ensuing centuries, telling again, usually in condensed forms, the adventures of Rama and Krishna and excavating that great mine of subject-matter, the *Mahabharata*. These renderings of Puranic literature were encouraged by the strength of the devotional cults in medieval Kerala, while they served an obvious educational purpose, by acquainting those who did not read Sanskrit with the classic stories in which all Hindus found the symbolic structure of their religion; they also presented, through versions of such works as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the central philosophies of the great popular spiritual movements. The best Malayalam works of this period, however, went somewhat farther, by seeking to develop the resources of the language and also to interpret the ancient legends in accordance with Malayali experience. It is for its success in this respect that the most celebrated Malayalam poem of the 15th century, still very widely read, is Cherusseri Nambudiri's *Krishnapattu*, a retelling of the Krishna cycle as if it had taken place in Kerala, with detailed pictures of Malayali life and evocative descriptions of the seasons and the landscape as they would be observed by Cherusseri's compatriots.

Many of the early poets in Malayalam were of Nambudiri caste, for the simple reason that they were easily bilingual and completely familiar with the Sanskrit originals from which they worked. Yet the greatest of them—the only poet of the time whose reputation and achievement equal those of the 18th-century dramatic poets, Unnayi Warrier and Kunchan Nambiar—was a Nair of a low sub-caste, Tunchathu Ezhuthachan, who in the 16th century conducted a village school in the tiny Malabar community of Trikkandiyur.



21. Suchindram: a temple tank with its pavilion. The houses beside the tank are inhabited by the local Brahmins

22. The tribes of the Keralan hills are nominally Hindu, but they also worship their own deities and in some of their religious dances wear masks like this example from the State Museum of Trichur

23. Mavelikara: a Dharamsala, or hostel for pilgrims, opposite the temple. It is a typical example of Keralan native architecture

Ezhuthachan was not merely a poet of great power and sensitivity. He was also a pioneer in the movement to free learning and literature from Brahminical control, and his poems were largely directed to that end. In 16th-century Kerala, Sanskrit was taught only by Brahmins and only to their own caste or to members of ruling families. To complete his stock of knowledge, Ezhuthachan travelled into Tamilnad and other parts of South India where the Brahmins were not quite so exclusive in their pretensions, and when he returned dedicated himself—ironically apologizing for his presumption as a man of Sudra caste—to embodying in vernacular poetry the religious truths which, as a dedicated Vaishnavite, he believed should be spread among the people without regard for caste. He used a curious form of composition known as Kilipattu, in which the narrator was supposed to be the Kili, or parrot, sacred to Saraswati, goddess of learning and literature. But the language he used was freshly colloquial, and it was Ezhuthachan's breakthrough from the stilted Malayalam of earlier writers that opened the way for the fluency with which the language was later handled by the Kathakali poets and by Kunchan Nambiar. Ezhuthachan's best-known works are the *Adhyatma Ramayanam* and the *Mahabharatam*. The first is in fact a translation, though a highly readable one, with which pious and literate Hindus in Kerala are still familiar from constant rereading: it is probably the most popular of all classical Malayalam writings. The *Mahabharatam*, however, is something different —a completely original and highly condensed retelling of the epic story which shows the freshness and conciseness of Ezhuthachan's work at its best.

For all the originality of treatment necessitated by the character of the language, and for all the variations of form introduced by changing dramatic conventions, Malayalam literature until the 19th century remained trapped within the cage of Puranic fictions and quasi-religious themes. There is no epic mingling contemporary history with romantic tragedy like the *Shilappadikaram* of an earlier age, and there is no subjective lyric poetry detached from religious emotion. As for prose, while these centuries produced a considerable didactic literature—translations of

Sanskrit treatises and commentaries on religious works—there is nothing of an imaginative nature, nothing, for example, resembling the great story cycles of North India. Even in comparison with the other major Indian vernacular literatures, that of Malayalam before the 19th century was notably circumscribed in its subject matter, and this was due undoubtedly to the strength of Brahmin social and intellectual domination, and to the fact that imported cultures—Moslem and Christian—remained segregated, and exerted no influence resembling that which Islamic concepts have wielded in the Moghul-dominated north even over passionately anti-Moslem groups like the Rajputs and Sikhs.

Yet what little true secular literature existed in Malayalam before the end of the 18th century in fact came from Moslems and Christians. It was the Moplahs who composed in Arabu-Malayalam dialect the appealing love songs called Kessu-pattu, and the first really original prose work in Malayalam was written by a Keralan Catholic priest, Paramakkevil Thoma Kathanar, who went on a journey to Rome in the 18th century and returned to record his experiences in a travel narrative, *Varthamana Rustham*, the earliest piece of Malayalam writing directly concerned with personal experience.

The visual arts in Kerala were similarly limited. If one can regard Kathakali as synthesizing at their best the literary, dramatic and musical arts of traditional Kerala, the visual arts are brought together in the temple complex, where all originate, even if at a later period some of them are transplanted to the palaces. For there are few parts of India in which the secular arts and particularly the folk arts have been so meagre as in Kerala. Keralan homes, even those of princes, have always been ascetically simple, with little furniture, and few decorations except in the puja rooms where the icons of the gods reside. The customary form of domestic adornment is, significantly, a temporary one—the elaborate symbolic patterns of rice paste which are traced on the floors of rooms and even outside houses; in the Brahmin streets of Trivandrum Fort one sees a great variety of them, traced freshly in the early morning on the pavement out-

side the entrances to the houses, with a different design, like a heraldic motif, for each family. Except in the service of religion, Keralan handcrafts have always been singularly uninteresting. Only in recent years have coloured textiles begun to replace the white garments which Malayalis of every class used to wear, while the potters make dull and utilitarian earthenware, rarely adorned with even simple decorations. One would be inclined to attribute the lack of vibrant colouring and of ingenuity of design in Keralan crafts to the influence of the brilliant landscape, whose tones seem to require no compensating personal or domestic colour, if it were not for the peacock brilliance of Kathakali and the elaborate splendour of religious processions on the Malabar Coast. The real explanation is doubtless to be found in the view, fostered by Nambudiris and accepted by other Malayalis, that splendour belongs only to the Gods, a view expressed most dramatically in the great annual procession when the image of Sri Padmanabhan is taken from the temple of Trivandrum to the sea coast, adorned in jewelled richness, while the Maharaja accompanies it, bareheaded and barefooted, and clad only in a simple white mundu, the humble dress in which the devotee must always present himself to the God in a Keralan temple.

There are two types of temple in Kerala, the rare stone temples in the Dravidian style, mainly in southern Travancore, and the wooden temples in the ancient and indigenous Keralan style. These forms of architecture differ in much more than choice of building materials. The Dravidian temples of Suchindram and Trivandrum are notable landmarks. Their structures are characterized by the enormous pylon-like gate towers called gopurams, heavily decorated with stone and gilded finials, which tower over all the other buildings in the temple complex and can be seen, like the spire of a cathedral, from a great distance. Within the high stone walls of these Dravidian temples there are veritable towns of halls and shrines, united by elaborate processional corridors. Even outside the main enclosures there are highly decorated dancing halls and other buildings, like the beautiful pavilion which stands for all passers to see in the middle of the great tank beside the temple at Suchindram.

The Keralan type of temple, by contrast, is externally modest, almost self-effacing, as if to emphasize the secrecy of devotion. Sometimes, as in a royal temple like that patronized by the princely house of Cochin at Tripunithura, there may be an elaborately carved wooden gateway, similar to those which guard the entrances to temples in Nepal, but such structures are rare. Usually the outer court of the temple, which is used for processions, will be surrounded by a blank stone wall, often a low one, and the inner court will be enclosed by a wooden cloister, undecorated on its outer side. Inside this cloister, which only Hindus can usually enter, stand a number of detached buildings, of which the most important are the srikoil, or sanctuary, and the mandapam, or dancing hall. All these buildings are built of wood, with low stone supporting walls and roofs covered with copper or tile, and with wide, deep eaves. The srikoil is usually, though not invariably, circular, with a conical roof which rises slightly higher than the other buildings, though even this is usually much lower than the surrounding trees. Indeed, rather like Japanese temples, these typical Keralan buildings, with their modest dimensions and subdued colours of weathered wood and tile, blend quietly into their settings. Their splendour is internal. Within the sacred enclosure they break into a profusion of elaborate decoration. Wall spaces are covered with a tapestry of brilliant paintings of the lives of the Gods, and the uprights and brackets of the buildings, as well as their coffered ceilings, are carved in what Stella Kramrisch describes as 'a frenzy of devotional imagery'.

Wood carving is, par excellence, the Keralan art. Except for a few early Jain sculptures, which may well have been the work of immigrant artists, there is little local stone carving which compares with the Tamil masterpieces of Mahabalipuram and Kanchipuram, while Keralan bronzework is a rather heavy imitation of that which flourished in the kingdom of the Cholas. But the wood carving, sometimes fanciful and as airy as Moghul screenwork, sometimes massive and strong in spite of its intricacy of workmanship, forms a distinctive regional contribution to the Dravidian sculptural traditions. Wood is abundant

in Kerala, and the Malayalis have always been adept at its use.

The development of Keralan painting is obscure, mainly because of the limited time wooden buildings can survive in the climate of the Malabar Coast; it is rarely used except as mural decoration. The earliest extant examples are found on the less perishable walls of caves, and these belong to the tradition of classical Indian painting associated historically with the Guptas. They survive at only one site, on the walls of the rock-hewn 8th-century Siva temple at Tirunandikkara (formerly in Travancore but now just outside the boundaries of the Keralan state), and they show, among clouds, rocks and flowers which are now barely discernible, the figures of deities bearing a marked resemblance to those of Ajanta. This style of painting can be related to the surviving 8th- and 9th-century Buddhist sculptures; its eclecticism was doubtless offensive to the Brahmins, for it appears to have vanished during the period, between the 10th and 11th centuries, when their domination over Kerala was securely established.

The time of transition can be considered only conjecturally, since, after the murals of Tirunandikkara, no Keralan paintings are known which can safely be dated prior to the 16th century, when the great figure of Siva Nataraja was painted in the temple of Ettumanur, and the artists employed by the Raja of Cochin depicted—with a surprising disregard for any Western influence—the story of the Ramayana on a series of panels in the section of the palace at Mattancherri built by the Portuguese. Later came the murals in the Padmanabhapuram Palace, in the Sri Padmanabhan Temple at Trivandrum, in the Vadakunnathan Temple at Trichur, and at the very end of the tradition, in the late 18th or possibly even the early 19th century, the vast representation of Vishnu in the Palace of the Rajas of Kayanlulam at Krishnapuram. These are the leading examples among many, and they show, despite local variations and despite the fact that they cover a period of at least two and a half centuries, a remarkable similarity of approach on the part of their anonymous artists, who worked within rigid, locally established canons of style and iconography.

Warmth and density of colour, sumptuousness of outline, a crowding of space by divine or heroic figures as superhuman as those of Kathakali and often in vigorous movement, are the characteristics of Keralan painting that immediately strike one. It has none of the delicacy one associates with Moghul or Rajput work, none of the idyllic softness of Ajanta or Sigiriya; its appeal is limited by its intention of giving an overwhelming impression of the superhuman attributes of the Gods. Thus, except for very rare examples, such as some of the later works in the Dutch Palace, these paintings have no background, nothing to distract attention from the figures of the deities whom the devotee has come to contemplate; in a religious sense they are totally functional. Stella Kramrisch, the one art historian of note so far to make a thorough study of Keralan painting, has admirably expressed the difference between this Malayali tradition and the types of Indian art which are more familiar in the West:

> Classical Indian painting has shown God in his manifestations in the world, enchanted by their presence. They moved on the ever-green slopes on Mount Meru or in the clouds nearby. They had their chariots and palaces, groves and mountain caves as places of manifestation. There, ever young and beauteously active, they had their play in which all things took part, trees and rocks, the pillars of the palace, the gleaming jewels and dancing scarves. This adorable world, the pleasance of the Gods in which they move at will, is not painted on the walls of the temples and palaces of Kerala. Its phantasmagoria is not displayed, no houses are built in these paintings for the Gods to dwell in, no groves to have their sport in; they have no ground to tread on; no space in which they could be shown gracing it with their movement and presence, for there is nothing beside their presence. Nothing exists outside it. They occupy all the space, and their ambient lines clasp it as much as they communicate their fullness to the many shapes which they engender; all are part of their presence and have no separate existence. Borne by the vastness of the appearance of the Gods, they are its adornments, jewelled clasps and rings which hold the bounteous shape within bonds

as tight as are its outlines. These then are the confines of their all-filling, all-replenished presence; the encircling ornaments and raiments in which the pressure of the body of divine presence is felt and contained, and the capacious outline with which this presence confronts the devotee for whose sake it is displayed. Even though thus encompassed, there is no end to the presence of a God but where it coincides with that of another divinity. The limits of the body are augmented until they touch upon the confines of another presence equally potent in form-engendering shape. . . .

Spaceless, but voluminous, the closeness of shapes is massed and it is mastered by a linear context whose ebb and flow is staid around the central theme, the compact figure of divinity. God in the world was the theme of classical Indian painting. The world of the Gods is the content of the painted walls of Kerala. (*The Arts and Crafts of Travancore*, 1948.)

Whether the Keralan style of painting is the product of the region's peculiar religious evolution between the 11th and the 16th centuries, or whether it stems from a lingering Dravidian tradition, is now impossible to say, since the pre-16th-century paintings that might have informed us of its evolution have been lost. What we do know is that it is the only form of Hindu painting practised in Kerala during the last three centuries before the 19th. Until the influence of European painting was felt in the Victorian era, there was no school of secular painting in this region, and Keralan artists were never influenced by the practice of miniature painting that extended into the most southerly Moslem states of the Deccan.

Doubtless because their traditions were Arabic rather than Persian, even the Moplahs developed no local form of Moslem art, while in their mosques they made no attempt to imitate the architectural graces of the Moghul north, and contented themselves mainly with perishable wooden buildings of utilitarian simplicity.

The only non-Hindu artistic tradition, in fact, was that developed by the Syrian Christians, many of whose churches are decorated with mural paintings dating from the 16th century on-

wards—notably the series representing the Passion in the Cheria Palli church at Kottayam and the St. Stephen cycle in the Kanjoor church at Vallarappily. These paintings seem to have been the work of native painters influenced to some degree by the Portuguese, though many motifs remind one of Coptic wall paintings and suggest a mingling of Eastern and Western ecclesiastical traditions in the Keralan murals. These Christian paintings show a primitive freshness of eye, a feeling for the rhythm of human action, a power of conveying pathos as well as celestial grandeur, which are absent from their Hindu counterparts. Their clear vividness of colour fits admirably into the richly toned interiors of the Syrian churches, with their splendidly carved and painted multiple altars which form dense patterns of gold and red under the lofty vaults, where the resonant Syrian chants, unaccompanied by any instrument, complete the impression of an ancient culture that, for all the Hindu influences playing upon it, has still retained its own integrity and its own expression in appropriate sacred arts.

PART V

KERALA IN MODERN INDIA

II

Prelude to Independence

THE political settlement in Kerala after the defeat of the Travancore-Cochin revolt of 1809 lasted for almost 140 years, with the British ruling directly in Malabar and their domination secure from Cannanore down to Cape Comorin. For the first eighty years of that period the life of the Malayalis changed comparatively slowly. The traditional caste structure seemed almost unshaken; the parallel social organization based on patrilineal and matrilineal joint families continued unreformed. Thanks to their economic strength as landowners in Malabar and to the support of the Maharajas in Travancore and Cochin, the Brahmins enjoyed their privileges almost undiminished, and the temples remained the preserves of the higher castes. In the courts of the two ruling families who alone had survived from among the many dynasties of medieval Kerala, the traditional culture of the Malabar Coast displayed its last autumnal flowering.

This was most magnificently in evidence in Travancore, during the reign of Swathi Thirunal (1829–1847), who gathered around him a court of poets and musicians as splendid as Martanda Varma's in the 18th century. Swathi Thirunal himself was a learned man and an extraordinary linguist, speaking fluently all the principal Indian vernaculars, as well as English, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, but he is remembered most of all as one of the last great classical composers of South Indian music. Like most of his family, he was a Vaishnavite devotee, and in honour of Sri Padmanabhan, the local manifestation of Vishnu, he composed hundreds of poetic hymns, many of which are still sung by the musicians and the common people of Travancore.

Yet even behind the medieval façade of Swathi Thirunal's court, processes of change were at work. The 19th-century rulers

of Travancore had the same split vision as their ancestor Martanda Varma, and, despite their attachment to religious, cultural and even monarchical traditions, they recognized the need for the very reforms that would hasten the old order's end. As early as the 1830's Swathi Thirunal gave Travancore a westernized judicial system and a legal code on the British model, and in the interest of efficient administration he transferred the public offices from Quilon to the Fort at Trivandrum, the walled central area of the city where each of the Maharajas in turn built a new palace to celebrate the greatness of his reign. But the process of reform was haphazard, and great anomalies remained. For example, until 1878 all the records in Travancore were still written by stylus on narrow strips of cadjan or palmleaf, and even today the great warren of the State Archives in Trivandrum is stacked with millions of these brittle, browning documents, which are still consulted to establish disputed land titles.

In the three different units of Kerala, as the 19th century continued, there began to appear the unplanned infrastructure of a modern state—systems of public works, communications and education. Irrigation had been a special care of local rulers even in the medieval period, and throughout the Victorian era the extension of water channels was carried on under governmental supervision, while from the 1880's dykes were built in many low lying coastal regions to protect paddy land subject to the encroachment of the tides. Not only was the inland water transport system improved by the construction of new canals, so that it became—and still is—possible to sail almost the whole way from Calicut to Trivandrum without touching the sea, but for the first time serious attention was paid to the establishment of an efficient road system, a need which Tippu Sultan alone among earlier rulers had clearly recognized. In this respect Malabar was more advanced than either Cochin or Travancore; to secure their military control, the British linked the district with the rest of the province of Madras by the wide, well-kept roads, shaded by banyan trees, which they built throughout India and which remain their most impressive monuments. In railway communication, also, the British-ruled area was far in advance of the

princely states. By 1862 the line from Calicut to Madras was already open, while it was only in 1902 that Ernakulam, the capital of Cochin, was linked with Madras; the railway did not reach Trivandrum until 1918.

Thus, throughout the 19th century, large parts of Kerala remained virtually isolated from the rest of India, but not from the outside world, for the trade in spices only increased. The sailing ships and later the steamboats came to the ports of the Malabar Coast from all over the western world, and the Victorian age saw the development of the plantation system and the establishment of Kerala's first industries through European initiative.

The planters began to move into the uncultivated jungle area of the Western Ghats even before the end of the 18th century, for it was just after the British annexation of Wynad from Mysore that Murdoch Brown started the first coffee plantation at Anjarakandi. Slowly the plantations spread their patchwork pattern through the whole of this mountain area, turning the local Paniyar tribesmen into the helots of the coffee growers. During the 1860's and the 1870's pests and plant diseases almost ruined the coffee industry, but it later recovered, and to this day the planters, who have now differentiated their crops by adding tea and pepper and experimentating with cacao, dominate the economy of Wynad. They established an even tighter control over the High Ranges, around Mount Anamudi, where in 1877 a local petty raja handed over some 227 square miles of Kerala's tiny area to the North Travancore Land Planting and Agricultural Society. The concession is still worked by a group of Scottish tea merchants, whose representatives, with the 60,000 plantation workers as their subjects, run the whole area as a little empire where the spirit of British India hovers for a few remaining years. At Munnar in the heart of the High Ranges one discovers, like a time traveller, a lingering survival of the sahib life and even of some of the sahib prejudices portrayed in *A Passage to India* and *Burmese Days*; tea, after all, earns enormous quantities of foreign exchange, and any Indian government will concede a great deal to be sure of getting it produced efficiently. By the 1870's the plantations were also thrusting into other parts of

the Ghats, such as Ponmudi and Peermade, with the result that, quite apart from its continued supremacy in spices and coconut products, Kerala now produces almost all India's rubber and ranks third to Darjeeling and Assam among the tea-producing regions.

Kerala's somewhat hesitant industrial revolution began in the 1850's, when the Germans of the Basel Mission, moved by philanthropic rather than commercial considerations, decided to develop the traditional weaving industry of Calicut by establishing there and in Cannanore the first textile establishments operated on a factory system. The factory they founded in Calicut is still working, and there I saw the old Jacquard looms, brought in nearly a century ago, weaving modern fabrics designed by a visiting American artist to be sold on the export market. Also surviving is the tile factory which the same mission established at Calicut in 1873, thereby founding another new Keralan industry. Textiles and tiles are still among the most profitable of Malabar's few industrial products. An even more important industry developed in Travancore during the 1860's when a sailing-ship captain, whiling away in Alleppey a season between monsoons as he gathered his cargo of spices, devised a loom on which the coir yarn spun in the back yards of Kerala could be woven into that highly serviceable material, coconut matting. All along the canals at Alleppey the great English weaving establishments were built, walled round like old East India forts and very impressive in their whitewashed massiveness; the buildings still survive, though in many of them the gigantic wooden handlooms are rotting in disuse. The industry was one of the mainstays of the Keralan economy during that long period when the poverty of English workers made them mass customers for this cheap and long-lasting floor covering; the invention of synthetic carpeting and the rise of British living standards have since sharply reduced the market for coir and its products.

Plantations and primitive industries initiated and controlled by foreign interests merely accentuated the traditional economic patterns in Kerala, with its concentration on cash crops and simple industrial products for export. The process was started

by the Portuguese and the Dutch, with their ever-growing markets for Malabar spices, but it was under the British that the disproportion in the economy became most pronounced. The situation has not changed much since independence, and present statistics reflect fairly accurately the agricultural pattern which was frozen into at least semi-permanent form during the 19th century: 43 per cent of the cultivated 9,000 square miles of Kerala is taken up with non-food crops, or with food crops, such as spices, cashew nuts and tea, which are grown almost entirely for export, as against 34 per cent devoted to rice, much of it on badly irrigated land that grows only one poor crop a year. This situation is not only the most important cause of Kerala's recurrent food crises; it has also produced an economy exceptionally sensitive to changes in living patterns elsewhere in the world (one has only to consider what might happen if Americans gave up their taste for cashew nuts!), and to competition in any of its special areas of cultivation, such as the recently developing rivalry of Malaya in the pepper trade.

If the pattern of economic exploitation which the British developed during the 19th century merely completed that begun by earlier trader-invaders, the progress in education which they initiated brought a new and entirely revolutionary element into the life of the Malabar Coast. The Malayalis were later than the Bengalis in taking to modern education, but in the long run they did so much more thoroughly; they were started on the career that made them the most literate people of India by the 19th century influx of missionaries—first Protestant and later Catholic—who were willing to concentrate their activities on education rather than proselytization.

How successfully these dedicated men worked I realized when I found that the one facet of the British past to which Malayalis of almost all viewpoints paid spontaneous tribute was the schooling provided by the missionaries. In most of India missionaries are distrusted figures, suspect of attempting to change by moral pressure the pattern of custom within which the ordinary Indian lives and dies. In Kerala they seemed to have learnt, from the failures of the Portuguese bishops, the dangers of dog-

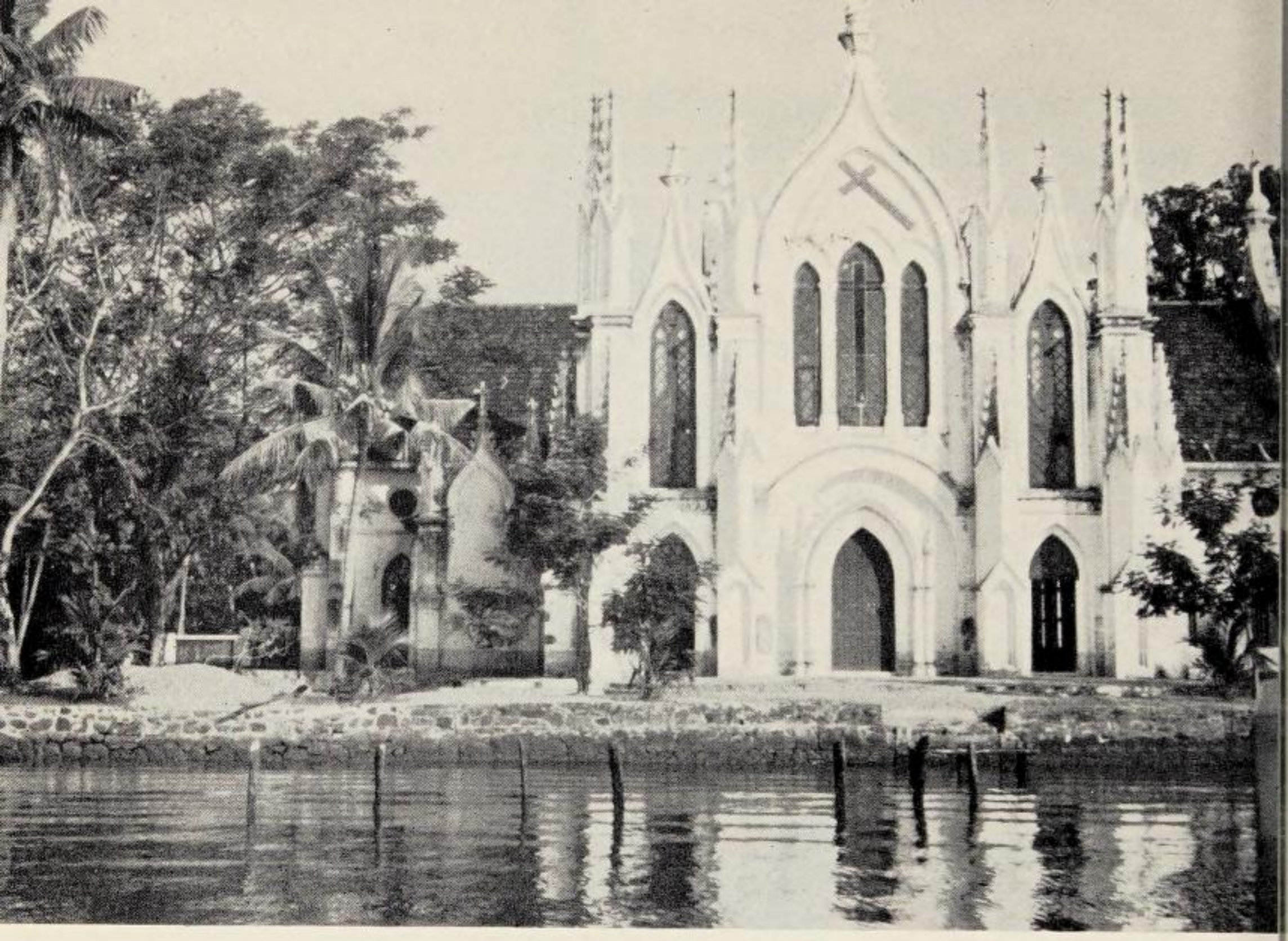
matism, and on the whole they behaved with exemplary restraint. It is true that two rashly bigoted young Evangelicals from the Church Missionary Society, Joseph Peet and W. J. Woodcock, caused something of a scandal in Kottayam during the 1830's by trying to institute sweeping reforms in the Syrian Orthodox Seminary; this incident, which is usually embellished in the telling by the story of how one of the missionaries broke into the Seminary strong-room and stole the historic Quilon copper plates, embittered relationships between Anglicans and the more conservative Syrian Christians for many years, but the fact that it is so vividly remembered shows how exceptional such actions on the part of missionaries in Kerala must have been. Most of them reciprocated the tolerant welcome they found on the Malabar Coast, where the native princes followed the practice of the medieval Kulasekharas, giving land to the Christians and taking a close personal interest in their activities.

Where the Portuguese Catholics had been content with offering a high degree of education to the few, the Protestants were eager to give instruction to the many. The pioneer in this direction appears to have been the German, W. T. Ringletaube, who arrived in Trivandrum in 1806 and, with a land grant from the Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai, set up a school to give elementary instruction to poor children, irrespective of caste or creed. Other missionaries followed his example, and soon afterwards, under the influence of the British Resident, Colonel Munro, the two native rulers of Kerala decided to enter directly into the field of education. The early plans were quite ambitious. In 1817 the Rani of Travancore ordered that vernacular schools should be set up at state expense in all the villages, with compulsory attendance for all children between the ages of 5 and 10; in the following year 33 such schools were set up in Cochin. At the same time, the first state-supported English school was established at Mattancherri.

These pioneer experiments in state education were not very successful. The vernacular schools languished for lack of competent trained teachers, and it was not until the 1890's that they were established on a really sound and lasting basis. Some of the

24. Fort Cochin: the Cathedral of Santa Cruz

25. Cranganore: a modern Syrian Catholic church now marks the place where St. Thomas is said to have landed in A.D. 52 to begin the conversion of the Malayalis



26. Vypeen: a Syrian church with the emblem of Coonen Cross—the slanting cross on which the Indian Christians took their 17th-century oath to defy the authority of the Roman Church

27. Kottayam: a Syrian Christian wedding

English schools, however, survived to play an important part in the development of higher education in Kerala. The English elementary school in Trivandrum which the Maharaja Swathi Thirunal established in 1834 eventually became University College, and that which the ruler of Cochin founded in Ernakulam in 1845 rose from similarly humble beginnings to become the Maharaja's College; both of these institutions are now incorporated in the University of Kerala. In accordance with Malayali traditions, the education of women was not neglected. Early in the century the missionaries began to set up schools for girls, particularly for the children of converts, and one of them was taken over in 1864 by the State of Travancore; it developed into the Women's College of Trivandrum, one of the most important institutions of its kind in India. By taking such an active interest in education, the rulers of the Keralan native states set a precedent which has been followed to this day; the expenditure on education in Kerala is still proportionately the highest in India (about 12 rupees per capita as against 8 rupees in Madras, Kerala's nearest rival, and less than 4 rupees in a typical Hindi-speaking state of North India like Uttar Pradesh). Yet in Kerala education never became fully state-controlled; in fact, a further element of variation entered into the picture during the early 20th century when Hindu organizations began to found their own schools parallel to those of the missionaries. Malabar lagged behind the princely states, partly because of the relative inactivity of the British in providing state education, and partly because of the cultural backwardness of the local Moplah population, particularly the Moslem women. Even today the educational standards of Malabar are far below those of southern Kerala; this is particularly evident in the small number of students attending institutions of higher education and in the fact that the literacy rate among women is less than half that of Travancore and Cochin.

Western education brought Western expectations, reflected particularly in the emergence of a local press. Early in the 1860's news-sheets in Malayalam were being printed in the Cochin area, and by 1890 the first of the influential Keralan newspapers,

the *Malaya Manorama*, began to appear in Kottayam, produced by a group of politically awakened Syrian Christians, under the leadership of Kadathil Varughese Mappillai. By this time Keralan literature was moving in new directions, and the first novels in the Western manner were beginning to appear. *Malaya Manorama*, and the mass newspapers that followed it, encouraged this trend by publishing short stories and essays, by nurturing literary criticism, and by helping to develop a modern form of Malayalam, less Sanskritized than the language of the 18th-century poets and Kathakali dramatists, which would be better adapted for journalism and for the new types of fiction. Even more important, these newspapers gave means to express the desire for change that by the last decade of the Victorian era had begun to permeate every level of Keralan society.

There were complicated economic and social as well as educational reasons why so many Malayalis at this time began to realize that their traditional way of life had become obsolete. The failure of the rising led by Paliath Achan and Velu Thampi at the beginning of the century had finally taught the Nairs that their traditional vocation as feudal warriors was at an end. At first they turned their attention to managing their lands—few became actual farmers—and here they were temporarily encouraged in Travancore by the Royal Proclamation that gave them absolute possession of their estates, which formerly they had held only at the ruler's pleasure. But soon it became evident that the very structure of the matrilineal joint family made it difficult for the younger Nairs to occupy themselves meaningfully once their military trade had gone. Perhaps because of the physical isolation of Kerala, or perhaps because of their innate independence, the Nairs did not follow the example of other Indian warrior races—such as the Sikhs, the Rajputs and the Mahrattas—and hire themselves out as mercenaries to the British. Instead, they believed that the growing civil service of the native states should be thrown open to them, and the fact that for generations the best posts had been given to Tamil Brahmins, who counted as 'foreigners' in Malayali eyes, was a source of perpetual grievance to the Nair community.

The equally large Christian community had its own grudges. As the trading monopoly of the East India Company faded and finally vanished after the Indian Mutiny, many of the Christians prospered as merchants and entrepreneurs in the benign atmosphere of Victorian free trade. They became private bankers, and when native Joint Stock banks began to appear at the end of the 19th century it was the Syrian and Chaldean Christians who were most active in promoting them. They even began to imitate the British and establish plantations in the hill country. Like every other emergent bourgeoisie in history, the more prosperous Christians resented the fact of living under an autocratic form of government which gave them no say in the regulation of public affairs, and, though for different reasons, by the 1890's they found themselves united in political discontent with the Nairs.

Meanwhile the lower castes whom tradition had relegated to despised occupations and had forbidden to walk on the same roads as Brahmins, were stirring to revolt against their condition. The first dramatic manifestations of discontent from the base of the social pyramid came as early as the 1850's, when the women of the untouchable Shanar sub-caste, who had been converted to Latin Catholicism, objected to the maintenance of the custom which forbade them to clothe themselves above the waist. They began, in defiance, to dress like Nair women; upper-caste Hindus attacked them when they appeared publicly in such forbidden dress, and riots broke out so frequently in South Travancore that the government sent soldiers to restore the peace. The first real victory against the rigours of caste in Kerala was won by this small group of converts when, in 1859, the Maharaja Uthram Thirunal issued a royal proclamation allowing Shanar women to cover the upper parts of their bodies as they wished.

It was thirty years later, and within the Hindu community, that a movement arose which, in a generation of struggle, destroyed the very foundations of the elaborate social structure which the Nambudiris had created in the heyday of their power. It began among the Ezhavas; they were the strongest numerically of the Hindu communities, and the education which a minority

had received in the Christian schools had made them conscious of their potential power. This consciousness was given direction by a leader who rose from within the Ezhava caste itself and became the Keralan equivalent of Gandhi, at once a holy man and a social reformer.

Sri Narayana Guru was born in 1856 in the village of Champazhanthi, not far to the north of Trivandrum. Early in life he decided to adopt the way of the renunciate and to work for the spiritual and social regeneration of his people. His religious studies were difficult because of his low caste, and, as none of the holy men in Kerala was willing to initiate a man of such humble origins, he had to wait for years until he encountered a Tamil yogi of untouchable caste, working as a clerk in the British Resident's office, who consented to ordain him.

The change that has taken place during recent years in Kerala is suggested by the fact that it was a Nambudiri Brahmin in Trivandrum who first spoke to me about Sri Narayana Guru; the respect which he showed reflected the almost universal esteem which Keralans of all communities now feel for the great Ezhava teacher. He became one of the Malayali saints, ranking beside Sankara and Kulasekhara Alwar in the popular imagination, and the maxim around which all his teaching revolved, 'One Caste, One Religion, One God', became an ideal for thousands of caste Hindus as well as for Sri Narayana Guru's own people.

Sri Narayana Guru never wrote down his teachings, and never preached a sermon. His influence spread through the example of his life and the efforts of his many disciples. Like Gandhi, he believed that his people would become free from social disabilities only if they won respect by morally transforming their own lives. For this reason he persuaded many Ezhavas to abandon their traditional occupation of toddy tapping, since he believed that this associated them in the minds of pious Hindus with the evils of alcohol. He also sought to elevate their religious observances. In the past the Ezhavas had worshipped various manifestations of Dravidian deities in small shrines where shamans performed animal sacrifices. Sri Narayana proposed a

thorough Sanskritization of their observances, and, since the temples operated by the Brahmins were closed to them, he established a series of parallel temples, dedicated to Vishnu and Siva, in which an orthodox ritual would be celebrated, but by an Ezhava priest rather than a Brahmin. The first of these temples was consecrated in 1888 at Aruvipuram in Travancore; the event aroused the anger of the Brahmins, to whom Sri Narayana gave an answer that has become famous in Kerala. 'I am consecrating the Ezhava Siva and not the Brahmin Siva.'

Sri Narayana Guru intended such temples to symbolize the equality of the Ezhavas with all other castes. For himself, he did not value one religion more highly than another—'Whatever is one's religion, it is enough if the individual becomes good,' he once said—and he opened the temples which he founded to castes lower than the Ezhavas and, indeed, to all Hindus who chose to use them. Few high-caste Hindus have in fact done so, but there were certainly Nairs, if not Brahmins, among the disciples who gathered around Sri Narayana in the ashram which he set up at Varkala in 1904. His religious policy achieved two important results. It stemmed the tide of conversions to Christianity among low-caste Malayalis, and it gave the Ezhavas a sense of their own worth which transformed them from the passive underlings who made so slight a mark on the history of the Malabar Coast up to the 19th century, into a community conscious of the power which their numbers might one day give them. The Ezhavas had been kept down in the name of religion, and by raising them through religion Sri Narayana Guru destroyed the superstitious fear that had made them accept their own debasement.

Yet Sri Narayana was a social as well as a religious reformer, and he saw the new temples as centres of communal solidarity out of which might emerge a movement giving practical form to Ezhava hopes of emancipation. A secular organization, called the Travancore Ezhava Sabha, had already been founded in 1896, but it was not very successful, mainly because its reasoned arguments appealed only to the small educated upper layer of the Ezhavas. Its leader was Dr. Palpu, one of the few Ezhavas

who at this time had been able to enter the professions, and it was only when he came into association with Sri Narayana and with the popular poet, Kumaran Asan, that an effective caste organization was finally established in 1903 on the basis of the mutual aid associations which had sprung up around Sri Narayana's new temples. This organization was called Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, and its very name attracted those whose imagination had been stirred by the personality and the activities of the Guru, who became its life President. The Yogam—which soon became known by its initials, SNDP—quickly spread through the three regions of Kerala, uniting Ezhavas from the north of Malabar to Trivandrum in the south. Though it was never a party in the strict sense, it inevitably sought political ends, wielded political influence, and, as time went on, tended to fall under the control of political rather than religious personalities. (Its most recent leader, R. Shankar, was formerly Congress Chief Minister for Kerala.) But its main stress remained on education as a means of raising the social level of the Ezhavas, and in this respect it adapted the policy Sri Narayana had followed in religion, setting up its own system of schools and later even colleges which, though they were open to people of all castes, were intended primarily to bring forward the Ezhava people.

The example of the Ezhavas was quickly followed by the other important caste groups. In 1914 the Nair Service Society came into existence under the formidable leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan, one of the great grey eminences of 20th-century Kerala. Its aim, like that of the SNDP, was not only to further the interests of the caste it represented, but also to reform it from within by breaking down the divisions between sub-castes and thus welding it into a single community. The militant younger Nairs also wished to destroy the vestiges of the practice of morganatic union between Nambudiri men and Nair women; in this direction a great deal had been achieved even before the foundation of the Nair Service Society, by the publication in 1889 of one of the earliest works of Keralan literature in the Western manner, the novel *Indulekha*, by O. Chandu

Menon, which dealt in a rather Dickensian manner with the pretensions of the Nambudiris and the degrading nature of sambandham marriages. Like the SNDP, the Nair Service Society founded its own schools and colleges, so that in the first decades of the present century many Hindu-sponsored educational institutions began to balance those directed by the churches. In politics, the Nair organization became even more openly and cohesively active than the SNDP and its leader, Mannath Padmanabhan, has influenced Keralan politics, as I shall later show, more decisively than most of the actual leaders of the various parties.

Other caste groups followed, in less spectacular ways, the example of the Ezhavas and the Nairs. Among the untouchables appeared community organizations like the Pulaya Mahasabha, and even the Nambudiri Brahmins slowly realized that their traditions were unfitted for the modern world; in 1908 some of the more progressive among them formed the Yogakshema Sabha which aimed, among other things, at securing the rights of younger sons to marry within the caste and at ending the peculiar kind of purdah that existed among Nambudiri women. The Yogakshema Sabha was never a dynamic organization, but it represented a strong trend among the Brahmins, and over the next generation its aims were to be achieved, mainly through the spread of modern education.

In their beginnings these community organizations were inspired by the highest of humanitarian ideals, and there was at first an element of universalism in their outlook which made them shun the suggestion of caste exclusivism. This spirit led to a certain breadth of outlook and interest in the political agitations which began at the same time as the movements for social reform.

The initiative for political change in Kerala actually came from the ruling family of Travancore, which—whether from enlightenment or prudence—began in 1888 a very gradual transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. In that year the Maharaja Sri Mulum Thirunal created a Legislative Council which was not only the first of its kind in any Indian

state, but also ante-dated by several decades similar constitutional experiments in other parts of Kerala; only in 1925 did the Maharaja of Cochin establish a Legislative Council. In practice, the reform was little more than a gesture. Of the eight Councillors, only two were non-official, and these were to be picked by the Maharaja himself, while the rights of Council were so circumscribed that in practice it became an advisory rather than a legislative body. Yet its very foundation stirred the hopes of the people of Travancore, and in 1891 a group of ten thousand signatories presented a petition known as the Malayali Memorial which marks the beginning of popular political activity in Kerala.

The Memorial's approach was oblique; it criticized not the government's form, but its instruments. Malayalis, it claimed, were systematically excluded from the higher ranks of government service.

> This country which used from time immemorial to be administered by a number of native prime ministers, was ruled from 1817 to 1872 for about half a century by a series of foreign Dewans. Regularly and systematically these Dewans without exception introduced their relations, castemen and friends into the State.

The petitioners included members of all the important communities—Nairs and Ezhavas, Christians and Moslems. Five years later, in 1896, a further Memorial was signed by 13,000 members of the Ezhava community alone, asking for the same privileges as low-caste converts to Christianity, and, specifically, for the rights to enter government schools and to seek employment in the state service.

Both these Memorials followed the ancient Hindu custom of direct petition to the king, yet they also challenged the Maharaja's way of governing, and, though the wisdom of making concessions was immediately evident to the ruler and his advisers, these were not granted either directly or immediately. The custom of appointing Dewans from outside the state continued until, in 1947, Travancore ceased to exist as an autonomous principality; it was encouraged by the British, who liked

to see men trained in their own Indian Civil Service occupying this vital post. On the other hand, the government service was opened to Malayalis on all but the highest level, but in such a way that it is hard to avoid the impression of a quite deliberate policy of *Divide et impera*. Almost all the new appointments were given to Nairs, who seized their opportunities with such tenacity that even today they occupy almost all the key positions in the Keralan bureaucracy. The same policy was followed when, in 1904, Sri Mulam Thirunal decided to extend his experiments in constitutional government by establishing a new advisory body called the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly; more than half the members were elected, but since the franchise was based on land tenure most of the electors were Nairs. In 1907 this assembly was given the right of electing seven of the fifteen members of an enlarged Legislative Council, and automatically the Nairs gained a further small share in the business of government, which revived their old sense of being the traditional supporters of the Chera kings. At this modest price, serious political agitation in Kerala was averted until after the First World War.

It is significant of Kerala's isolation from the rest of India that until the 1920's political campaigns and issues were local in character. As early as 1903 the first meeting of the Indian National Congress was held in Calicut, but it aroused so little interest that a Congress District Committee for Malabar was founded only in 1910 and did not become really active until 1914, while in Travancore and Cochin there was no Congress organization at all until 1920.

In every part of Kerala the 1920's were a time of heightened political activity. The first All-Kerala Congress Conference was held at Ottapalam near Palghat in 1921; it inspired a few Keralans to play their part in the campaigns of non-co-operation with the British and of boycotting foreign cloth which were then in progress, and in Malabar, where British rule was direct and the struggle was most intense, Congress workers and students shared with their fellows in other parts of India the experience of police maltreatment and imprisonment.

Even so, the spectacular struggles in Kerala were still locally

oriented, and in Travancore especially most of the significant political activity during the 1920's and even the 1930's centred on the effort to democratize the state government and to secure a juster representation for all communities. Parallel with this political struggle there developed a widespread social agitation aimed at ending the more overt and humiliating forms of caste discrimination. Ironically, these two movements, with their strong egalitarian motivations, encouraged communal disagreements and established the peculiar factional pattern which has characterized Keralan politics ever since.

The political movement in Travancore was reawakened in 1919 when Sri Mulam Thirunal took another of his cautious steps forward into constitutionalism by introducing the principle of direct election to the Legislative Council. When the people of Travancore had time to examine his proposals they realized that out of the twenty-five members of the Council only eight would in fact be elected, and that the eight included those who would represent very narrow special interests (for example, the European planters could elect a member of their own), so that in the end only four were to be chosen by a general electorate still restricted to landholders. Furthermore, the Proclamation was issued by the Maharaja himself, not by the Legislative Council, and this was interpreted as a regression to direct autocratic rule. A movement of protest arose under the leadership of Changancherry Paraswaram Pillai; it conducted public meetings and submitted petitions. Once again, the Maharaja did not respond immediately, but two years later, in 1921, when the agitation had burnt itself out, he issued another autocratic pronouncement establishing a Council with an elected majority and extending the franchise to include members of the professions and university graduates.

In effect, little was changed. Only one person in thirty—and one Ezhava in seventy—could vote, and the Nairs, with less than a quarter of the population, were able to elect the majority of the representatives, with the Christians as perpetual minority, usually controlling about a quarter of the seats. In the four elections up to 1931 no Ezhava was returned, and only one Moslem.

Throughout the 1920's resentment steadily mounted among all these communities against what they called 'the Nair monopoly of Government services and the legislature'. The alliance of all creeds and castes which had existed at the time of the Malayali Memorial was destroyed, and, since the Nairs showed every intention of defending their gains, the other groups agitated separately for reform, petitioning the new Maharaja, Sri Chitra Thirunal, to institute adult suffrage and to reserve seats for the various communities in order to ensure that they would have spokesmen in the legislature.

The government rejected these demands, and, with the hindsight gained from observing the history of Keralan politics over the past generation, one cannot deny political shrewdness to the replies drafted by the Maharaja's advisers. 'The formation of communal electorates is altogether unsuited to Travancore,' said one of the official remarks. 'They tend to create communal cleavages in the country, a feeling which it is the aim of the Government to avoid.' And, on the question of adult suffrage: 'The divisions in Travancore are at the present based on communal or sectional interests, and unless popular parties formed on political lines come into existence the introduction of adult suffrage is likely to endanger the larger interests of the State.' In practice, these expressions of opinion masked an intention to leave the basis of authority undisturbed, and when the promised reforms were promulgated in 1932 they altered the forms of government, introducing a bicameral legislature, without either changing the franchise or making the administration in any way responsible to the legislature. The principle of autocracy remained unchanged.

But the response did change. Instead of a series of mild and passing protests, a movement of resistance developed which continued until autocratic rule finally came to an end with the incorporation of the state of Travancore into free India. In 1932 the Christians, Ezhavas and Moslems came together in the Joint Political Congress, aimed at gaining responsible government and led by representatives of all the malcontent groups, together with a few Nairs whose democratic ideals were stronger than

their sense of caste solidarity. As Moslem aims throughout India tended to differentiate themselves from those of other communities, this particular group became less active in the Joint Political Congress and eventually was absorbed into the Moslem League. The most consistent support for the movement was among the Christians, a fact which the authorities did not neglect to use in their efforts to discredit it among Hindus. In 1932 the Joint Political Congress, or Samyutka (United) Party as it was later called, led a largely successful agitation aimed at boycotting elections to the new legislative bodies. During most of the thirties it was this movement that channelled political agitation in southern Kerala. It remained local in aims, and support for the Indian National Congress in Travancore at this period did not go far beyond sympathy and a particular respect for Gandhi as an individual.

Rather ironically, it was when, at its Haripura conference in 1938, the National Congress decided that it would concentrate on British India and refrain from interfering in the struggles within the native states, that an effective organization based on Congress methods of struggle appeared in Kerala. It may well have been the intention of the resolution to make the local democratic movements take initiative into their own hands, and certainly this was the effect in southern Kerala, where in 1938 the Travancore State Congress was founded under the leadership of Pattom Thanu Pillai.

Meanwhile the movement against caste discrimination had fought its way to a successful conclusion. It began with the famous Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924. At Vaikom, one of the most holy spots in Kerala, the road which ran past the temple was closed to members of the lower castes. The Nair Service Society, led by Mannath Padmanabhan, declared against all manifestations of untouchability, and, in alliance with the SNDP and Congress workers, took Vaikom as a symbolic instance and began a civil disobedience campaign, in which caste Hindus accompanied outcastes in peaceful violation of the ban on walking outside the temple. The government forbade the demonstrations and guarded the road with police detachments.

Vaikom is in a very low-lying area, and the road became flooded during the monsoons, but the demonstrators kept up their pickets even in the worst weather, standing to their shoulders in water while the police carried on their vigil in boats. At the height of the campaign, Mannath Padmanabhan led a great protest march to Trivandrum in support of the Satyagraha, and finally, in 1925, Gandhi visited Vaikom and worked out one of his famous compromises, by which all the roads in the area were thrown open except for a small stretch outside the temple itself. In 1931 a similar campaign at Guruvayoor in Malabar verged on violence when the demonstrators tore down the iron fence around the temple, which the British government then closed completely. The Guruvayoor campaign was eventually called off, but the feelings which it aroused throughout Kerala opened the way for major reforms, and in 1936 the government of Travancore issued a Temple Entry Proclamation, the first of its kind in India, which opened the holy places of the state to all Hindus, irrespective of caste.

The Temple Entry Proclamation was the work of one of the most controversial public figures of 20th-century Kerala, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, who in that year was appointed Dewan for the state of Travancore. Ramaswamy Aiyar was in some respects a man of very progressive outlook, who genuinely desired to modernize the state he administered, and during his regime many reforms were carried out. The University of Travancore was founded in 1937, elementary education was made free and compulsory, and free meals were provided in the schools. A system of government loans helped to liberate many farmers from the grip of the money-lenders, and, to develop industrialization, the government established a number of state factories and encouraged private manufacturers by investing in their enterprises; even today most of the factories in Kerala owe their origin to the enterprise of Ramaswamy Aiyar, who turned Alwaye from a village in the midst of a laterite waste dotted with lantana thickets into a prospering industrial area. The measure of his foresight is shown by the fact that one of the first enterprises he started was a fertilizer factory. He even founded

homes for the destitute and the infirm, with the result that Travancore became—as it remains today—one of the few areas in India where beggars are noticeable by their absence.

Nowhere else in India at this period was there such enlightened administration in social and economic fields as in Travancore. Yet in politics Ramaswamy Aiyar was a strong-willed gradualist, completely unconvinced of the capacity of Malayalis, at their existing state of education, to rule themselves. He lived until 1966, and an article which he wrote in a 1965 issue of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* shows the obvious sincerity of his view that social and economic difficulties must be solved before political experiments can be attempted. Even of Kerala in the 1960's he remarked: 'To my mind, however, the problem, such as it is, is essentially not one of politics, but of economic imbalance.' This view lay behind his actions in the 1930's, and, if it does not justify them, at least it helps one to understand a man who earned the enmity of Congress and who for this reason has consistently, over the past generation, been presented as one of the leading villains in the drama of modern Kerala.

Yet, even if one can understand Ramaswamy Aiyar's viewpoint and appreciate his achievements, it is impossible to condone the rigour of his political actions. When, in 1938, the newly founded Travancore State Congress, in collaboration with the Youth League (a radical group founded in 1931), began its campaign of agitations for responsible government, the state authorities forbade all demonstrations and broke up student meetings with mounted police charges. The State Congress and the Youth League were banned. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the Christian princess whom Gandhi sent as his emissary to the Maharaja, failed to promote an accord between the malcontents and the government, and on August 26th Pattom Thanu Pillai and other State Congress leaders were arrested at a mass meeting held on Trivandrum Beach to initiate a great Civil Disobedience campaign. Other demonstrations followed. There were lathi charges by the police, schools and colleges were closed down, newspapers were suspended, and finally, when a

great crowd of country people began to march towards Trivandrum from Neyyattinkara, the police fired on them and killed a man called Raghavan. Provided with its first martyr, the cause flourished, and the State Congress leaders planned a vast gathering in Trivandrum on the occasion of the Maharaja's birthday. Having met the Maharaja and sensed his moral quality, I suspect that his hand was uppermost in the decision of the Travancore government to save bloodshed by withdrawing the ban on the State Congress and Youth League and releasing the imprisoned leaders unconditionally. Immediately afterwards Gandhi, who liked to respond to generous gestures, intervened and advised the State Congress to withdraw its agitation. The results of following his advice were twofold: Ramaswamy Aiyar regained the initiative, and the reforms which the Congress leaders had expected did not materialize; at the same time, the more radical members of the State Congress objected to the termination of the Civil Disobedience campaign and withdrew to join the Youth League, which henceforward represented the left-wing element in Travancore. Out of its ranks were later to emerge the leaders of the Communist Party and of the various Socialist parties in southern Kerala.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring principality of Cochin, political affairs had followed a much more tranquil course. A Legislative Council was not established there until 1925, but it began immediately with an elected majority, and—a bow to Malayali traditions—it included the first woman member ever to take part in an Indian legislative body. The Maharajas of Cochin were very attentive to the claims of their subjects, and they gained a reputation for reasonableness. Remembering the days of his youth, the veteran Cochinese Congress leader, K. P. Madhavan Nair, once told me: 'We would make six demands and the Maharaja would grant four, and leave the other two for the next time we asked him for something. He was a wise ruler.' In 1938, when Ramaswamy Aiyar was fighting bitterly against any immediate concessions to democracy in Travancore, the ruler of Cochin approved a law which provided for the beginnings of responsible government through the election by the

Legislative Council of a minister who would answer to them for a variety of departments dealing with industries and social services. The system was diarchical, and the more important departments, particularly Finance and Law, remained in the hands of non-elected officials, but—monotonous as it may seem to harp on the various ways in which the Keralan principalities pioneered in social and political matters—Cochin was for a number of years the only native state in India where even the slightest progress was made in the direction of responsible government.

Governmental methods in Cochin were much less harsh than in Travancore, and during the agitations of the later 1930's the leaders of the Travancore State Congress would often hold their meetings on safe Cochin soil. It was only during the Second World War, when the Congress militants formed themselves into a new local party, the Praja Mandal, that the police took strong action, and even then not because of local demands, but rather because Praja Mandal became linked with the Quit India movement of the Indian National Congress, and the British paramount authority forced the state government to take a sterner attitude than it might otherwise have done.

While the princely states of southern Kerala were finding their own ways towards democracy, Malabar followed a sharply different route through the interregnum between the wars. It was a more violent route, more marked with political extremity. Out of Malabar came the strength of Keralan left-wing radicalism, but in the 1920's the most important political event was essentially reactionary. It was the so-called Moplah rebellion, a violent uprising of the Moslem peasants which began in August 1921 and did not expire until the last guerrilla leaders were captured in the beginning of 1922.

It has always been difficult to assess the real motives of the Moplah rebellion. Those patriotic historians who see in every Indian insurrection a precursor of the struggle for independence led by Congress, regard the Malabar uprising as primarily political, a fight against British domination. Others see it as an outbreak of religious fanaticism, and yet others detect social causes,

particularly the resentment against the jenmis, or Hindu landlords.

In reality, all three elements played their part. But the principal cause of the rebellion was a religious issue out of which the Indian National Congress somewhat disingenuously tried to make political capital. When Turkey was deprived of her subject territories after the First World War under the Treaty of Sèvres, many Moslems resented the injustice which they felt was being done, not so much to Turkey, as to the Sultan in his role of Caliph. This feeling was much feebler among those who knew what Ottoman government meant in practice, than among the distant faithful of India, who, in protest against the treaty, immediately started the Khilafat movement. In 1919 a Khilafat conference was held in Delhi. Gandhi attended, and immediately saw the emotional appeal which the issue held for the Indian Moslems. The politician who shared with a saint the mind of that very complex little man immediately rose to the ascendant, and Gandhi made a cold-blooded calculation that by supporting Turkey (which he conveniently forgot had wielded an imperialism even more ruthless than that of the British) he might win the Moslems to the Congress cause. By 1922 the Khilafat issue had become meaningless because the Turks themselves deposed the sultan and shortly afterwards abolished the caliphate. But, before that, the interior of Malabar had been swept by a wave of violence worse than any since the expulsion of Tippu Sultan.

The Khilafat movement was supported in Malabar by both Congress workers and Moslems, but its strength lay in the mainly illiterate Moslem villages of the interior, particularly in the districts of Ernad and Vallavunad.

From the beginning of 1921 the police in Malabar had been forbidding political meetings and indiscriminately arresting Congress and Khilafat leaders, thereby increasing the sense of indignation which in the country districts was whipped up by fanatical preachers of Islam rather than by any feeling of identity with the Congress movement or with its ideal of a united free India.

One day in August, the drums began to beat in the village mosques of Ernad, where the authorities had attempted to arrest a local Khilafat secretary. Peasants hurried out with spears and swords, killing several policemen and driving the survivors away. This was the beginning of the Moplah rebellion. The news spread rapidly from district to district, and almost immediately the whole of central Malabar was ablaze. The original leaders of the Khilafat movement, whether Hindu or Moslem, faded discreetly from the scene, and the rebellion threw up its own élite—men who claimed authority as descendants of the Prophet or as hajis who had acquired religious merit by undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca. It was, in effect, a traditionalist revolt, seeking to re-establish in the countryside the rule of a Moslem past. The most formidable of the leaders, a carter named Valiankunnath Kunhamad Haji, set himself up as Raja of the Hindus, Emir of the Moslems and Colonel of the Khilafat Army, levied taxes and issued passports. Another, Seethi Koya Thangal, named himself governor of a Moslem principality and promised his followers magical protection against British bullets.

For a few weeks British rule was eliminated over hundreds of square miles of territory, and a rebel autocracy governed by the caprice of the guerrilla leaders. Soon, however, British reinforcements arrived. As they pushed into rebel territory, the fanaticism of the Moplahs was provoked to the point of hysteria, and they began to turn on the Hindus, murdering some, forcibly converting others, and looting the houses of the hated jenmis. Their violence was matched by the British. The Gurkhas, who did most of the guerrilla fighting, wielded their terrible kukris to such effect that even today their name is feared and execrated in the Moplah villages. Many rebels were hanged by special courts as severe and capricious as those which followed the Indian Mutiny, and many more were deported to the penal settlement of the Andaman Islands. The worst incident—a Black Hole of Calcutta in reverse—took place when ninety Moslem prisoners were forced into a closed railway van at Tirur. The train started on its journey to Coimbatore, but when the wagon was opened

a few hours later it was found that 61 of the 90 rebels had died from suffocation.

The exhaustion that followed the Moplah rebellion heralded a period of political stagnation in Malabar. Congress lost much of its popular appeal; the Moplahs felt that it had not supported them in their hour of travail, while the Hindus believed that its ill-considered support of Khilafat had encouraged the religious fanaticism which produced the rebellion, and which now made them feel unsafe among the Moslem neighbours with whom they had formerly lived at peace.

Yet, because the struggle there was part of the general fight being carried out by the Indian National Congress against British rather than native domination, Malabar still remained through the 1920's and the 1930's the real centre of the Congress movement in Kerala, and participated more actively than either Cochin or Travancore in all-India campaigns, such as the demonstrations against the Simon Commission in 1928, the Salt March of 1928, and the great Civil Disobedience campaign which continued intermittently from 1932 to 1934. But these events belong to the general history of India. Much more important for the future of Kerala itself was the development, after the abandonment of the Civil Disobedience campaign by the Congress high command in 1934, of a sharp schism between the conservative supporters of Gandhi and the young Malabar radicals who believed that resistance to the British should have been intensified rather than diminished.

It was out of this schism that Keralan Communism emerged. The Communist Party of India was founded in 1925. No organized local party existed in Kerala until the late 1930's, but by the beginning of the decade individual Communists were infiltrating the trade unions then beginning to appear in Calicut and Cannanore, and farther south in Alleppey, which, owing mainly to the poverty of the coir workers, quickly became the main centre of Communist activity in Travancore.

On the political level, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, which to all intents and purposes was a Malabar organization, came in 1934 under the control of the left-wing group

headed by E. M. S. Namboodiripad, a wealthy Brahmin landowner, and P. Krishna Pillai. In the same year the Congress Socialist Party was formed in North India, and in May 1935 a Kerala branch was established, supported by almost the whole of the Provincial Congress Committee. The new party attracted the members of Youth Leagues and student organizations, as well as the teachers and peasant intellectuals who were discontented with Gandhian vagaries and wanted to give a more consistently radical direction to Congress policy. Undoubtedly some of them were already Communists, but whether the leaders of the Congress Socialist movement in Kerala were at this time concealed members of the CP has been carefully hidden. It is, however, certain that in 1937, when a clandestine Communist Party organization was formed for the first time in Kerala, two of the five founding members were Namboodiripad and Krishna Pillai.

Meanwhile, Communist propaganda in the rural areas of Malabar was steadily intensified, largely through the enthusiasm of ill-paid village teachers. Thinly disguised as socialists, the militants began to create the great peasant following which has always been the strength of communism in Malabar, providing the movement with a much more consistent support than that given by the industrial workers. Wisely, the Communists remembered that Kerala is a land of villages, and their organization has always been country-based. In 1957, when they finally gained power in Kerala, a Congress Party newspaper in Calicut, *Mathrabhumi*, published an editorial which clear-sightedly assessed the importance of this aspect of Communist action on the Malabar Coast; what it said applies as much to the 1930's as to the 1950's or the 1960's:

> Deep-rooted in the soil of Kerala and tended by the constant care and attention of its activists is the Communist Party of Kerala. In every remote village there are Communist activists who are closest to the most down-trodden of the people and have identified themselves with these sections. It may be that such an activist is not well known. It might be that he goes about like a vagabond. But in his village, he keeps daily

contact with all individuals. And he takes the message of the party to every heart. He has an objective that keeps him inspired. And to achieve that objective he devotes his self-sacrificing endeavours. The better morrow might perhaps be a mirage, but to him it is the complete truth, and the means to achieve his aims he finds in the Communist Party. The party is his body and soul.

This passage was written to reproach defeated Congress workers for their lack of dedication, but it was a true picture of a whole class of Communist militants who have been working in this manner for a good quarter of a century, with an energy and a devotion Congressmen have never shown at any time in Kerala. By the outbreak of war in 1939 there were Communists in every rural area, in every trade union, in every student body, and at every level of the Congress organization. They even infiltrated the community organizations, such as the SNDP and the Pulaya Mahasabha. Men who had risen rapidly in the secret hierarchy, such as Namboodiripad and A. K. Gopalan, still masqueraded as Congress leaders in Malabar, while elsewhere crypto-Communists like K. C. George infiltrated the Travancore State Congress, and Achutya Menon, now the leader of the Right Communists in Kerala, became one of the active organizers of the Praja Mandal in Cochin.

The first open breach between the Congress and the Communists in Kerala came in 1940 when the Congress Socialist Party decided that the only means of surviving as an independent body would be to expel the Communists who were plotting to seize control of its organization. It was an act of major surgery, for several of the best-organized branches of the CSP seceded *en bloc*. The Kerala branch was among them, but, since the Communist Party was still illegal, the split was not given publicity, and Namboodiripad and his associates played for at least a few months the double role of open leaders of Congress, supposedly planning peaceful campaigns of civil disobedience, and secret leaders of the Communist party, bent on violent actions which they calculated would bring repression that could be turned to propaganda advantage. When Congress declared 'Anti-Repres-

sion Day' on 15th September 1940, the Communists took the opportunity to test out their terrorist methods for the first time. Crowds of demonstrators were incited to attack the police, and in Tellicherry several workers were shot. Others were hanged for killing policemen, and one Communist leader, K. P. R. Gopalan, who was involved in such an incident, was reprieved only on Gandhi's plea; he survived to be elected a Left Communist M.P. as recently as 1965. This was the first Communist blood-letting in Kerala, but by no means the last.

When Russia came into the war in June 1942, the fortunes of the Communists changed. Within a month the Party had been legalized. The line was now one of democratic respectability. Communists wormed their way even into conservative organizations like the Nair Service Society; the comedy of infiltration reached its height when E. M. S. Namboodiripad became President of the Yogakshema Sabha, the caste organization of the Nambudiri Brahmins. At the same time, since the British believed that every gain in the Communists' following meant a loss to Congress, the former were allowed complete freedom to organize and to print and distribute newspapers and pamphlets. They were able to consolidate their holds over the machines of trade unions, peasants' organizations and student unions, though by the end of the war their sycophancy towards the British had so undermined their mass support that in 1945, when the Party leaders contested the Malabar seats in elections for the Madras Legislative Assembly, not one of them was returned. But with peace and the beginning of the cold war they were able to make one of those pendulum swings at which Indian Communists have always been so adept, from the advocacy of democratic action to the practice of violence. They had created a well-knit party, and now was the time to use direct action in order to bring back the mass following they had lost in three years of political conformity.

They decided to strike where their influence had up to then been least openly demonstrated, in the state of Travancore. There the end of the war had brought the issue of responsible government once again to the fore, and in January 1946, Sir

C. P. Ramaswamy had made a proposal to settle the question by creating a constitution on the American plan, in which 'the position of the Dewan *vis-à-vis* the legislature and the judiciary will be approximated to that of the President of the U.S.A., subject always to the rights, privileges and prerogative of the sovereign'. It was a curious indirect tribute to the influence of British thought in India, that the State Congress did not for a moment consider accepting such a proposal; they continued to demand the removal of Ramaswamy Aiyar and the adoption of a responsible government on the Westminster model. The American blend of democracy and absolutism was even more alien to them than the native forms of autocracy.

As usual, the situation was complicated by communal rivalries. The Nair Service Society, despite its fine stand against untouchability in the 1920's, was still an organization devoted to fostering the interests of its own community, and Mannath Padmanabhan thought these could best be served by supporting the government which gave the Nairs a favourable position in the public service and in the legislature. Until the spring of 1947 the organized Nairs stood aside from the Congress agitation for responsible government, though individual Nairs took an active part in it. Opposition to the Dewan was concentrated principally among the Christians, who still supported the State Congress with its stress on civil disobedience as a means of political action, and among the members of the low-caste communities who, particularly in the Allepey area, had become very susceptible to Communist propaganda.

The action which the Communists took in this situation looks so much like a rehearsal for the large-scale Hyderabad uprisings of 1948 that one is tempted to believe that it was planned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India as the beginning of a national campaign of insurrection. Early in 1946 organization began in the villages of north Travancore. Partisans were trained, and at the end of the monsoon they were gathered in camps scattered through the countryside. On September 24th the Communist-dominated unions of Alleppey declared a general strike, and two days later the party militants led

their followers, armed literally with sticks and stones, to the large village of Punnapara, where they killed a few policemen and provoked Ramaswamy Aiyar into declaring martial law and sending the Travancore army hurrying north from Trivandrum. Against machine-guns the duped peasants and coir-weavers were helpless. In two days of pitifully unequal fighting at Punnapara and the neighbouring village of Vayalar at least three hundred of them were shot down. Most of the Communist leaders, however, escaped with their lives.

The memory of the battles of Punnapara and Vayalar still arouses strong feelings in Travancore. The Communists have transmuted the incident into a symbol of heroism and martyrdom, an epic day in the Party's history; when they won the elections of 1957 the first thing Namboodiripad did was to pay a ceremonial visit to the mass grave at Punnapara where the slain were buried. To non-Communists it is also a symbol, of cold-blooded political calculation leading desperate, hungry people to certain death in accordance with the revolutionary equivalent of Tertullian's tough old maxim, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.' The rebellion was instigated not by foolish but by highly intelligent men, and they did it because, even if success were impossible, defeat would profit the cause, which in the long run it did.

But the tragedy of Punnapara and Vayalar was almost obscured by the melodrama that shortly afterwards attended the disappearance of Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar from the stage of Keralan politics. In 1946, tiring at last of the burden of imperialism, Britain announced that on 15th August 1947 it would end its long domination of India. But states like Travancore were already in native even if not in democratic hands, and the lapse of British paramountcy would leave them, in law, independent countries. Undoubtedly the British, as well as the successor governments of India and Pakistan, hoped that the native princes would respond to the spirit of the times by electing to join one of the two countries. Yet the phantom of national glory stirred the mind of more than one Indian ruler, and in Travancore the Maharaja's recollections of the Chera past were reinforced by

his Dewan's visions of Travancore playing the diplomatically profitable role of a small power in the mid-20th-century world.

On June 11th, therefore, Ramaswamy Aiyar issued a declaration that from the day British rule ended in India Travancore would become an independent sovereign state. Whether the attempt at independence would have succeeded is doubtful; it is true that resistance to it built up surprisingly slowly, but there was one incident in Trivandrum in which the police fired on a crowd and killed three persons, and one more such incident would have been enough—if one can judge by the example of Junagadh and Hyderabad—to provoke Nehru's military intervention on behalf of an oppressed people. Two events radically changed Ramaswamy Aiyar's point of view. He paid a visit to Delhi, where Lord Mountbatten and the Indian leaders appear to have convinced him of the difficulties that would face an independent Travancore. He returned to Trivandrum, and a few days afterwards attended a concert in memory of Swathi Thirunal, the musical maharaja; as he was leaving, an unidentified swordsman slashed him across the face and severely wounded him. The Maharaja now took the situation into his own hands and telegraphed Mountbatten agreeing to join the Indian union. The Maharaja of Cochin had already agreed, without hesitation. In both states steps were now taken for the establishment of completely responsible governments, and the era of enlightened despotism terminated with the resignation of Ramaswamy Aiyar. After more than two thousand years, the rule of the Cheras and their descendants had ended in all but name.

12

The Road to Communism

UNITY was the one political gift which the events of 1947 did not bring to Kerala. It entered independent India as the three separate units of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin which had survived the British settlement of the late 18th century. But in almost every other respect it had changed greatly from the highly traditionalist society which had existed then and which in many areas persisted with little change to the outbreak of the First World War. The quarter of a century of political struggle since the early 1920's had brought responsible government and adult suffrage; though the maharajas still reigned for a short time longer, they were now merely figureheads without power.

The caste structure which to all outsiders seemed such a striking feature of Keralan life had undergone an extraordinary transformation. The crazy pyramid of pollution rules erected by the Nambudiris was almost destroyed in 1936 when Ramaswamy Aiyar opened the two thousand temples of Travancore to Hindus of all communities. The struggle actually went on until 1947, when the last of the great Satyagrahas against untouchability took place at Paliyam in Cochin. There the Paliath Achan still refused to allow low-caste people to walk past his house, but even members of the Cochin royal family joined in the demonstrations against him, and showed quite clearly that the repugnance for the idea of untouchability had spread into all classes in Kerala. From 1947 onwards the cruder aspects of caste discrimination survived only in a few of the remoter villages. Yet caste did not cease to exist, though its more unpleasant manifestations vanished. It was now manifested, less in social discrimination than in the consolidation of the old caste groups into streamlined community movements seeking to protect the

economic and political interests of their members. In some ways, as recent events in Kerala have shown, this made caste even more potent.

But perhaps the most important development in Kerala during the 20th century—in social and even in political terms—was the break-up of the old systems of inheritance. As I have shown, even before the First World War, the younger Nairs had become restive in the suffocating atmosphere of the matrilineal tarwad, where initiative was discouraged by the fact that a man had no clear rights over what he earned by his own efforts; on his death even his personal possessions went automatically to his nephews in the female line and not to his sons.

Thus it was with the approval of a majority of the Nair community that the traditional systems of inheritance were changed by a series of statutes whose consequences were probably more revolutionary than those of any other legislation enacted in Kerala. The first was the Nair Regulation of Travancore, passed as early as 1912, which allowed a man to leave half his personal estate to his sons. In 1925 came a further Nair Regulation, much more radical in its conception, which allowed the actual partition of any tarwad in equal shares to all members provided a majority voted in favour. Similar regulations in Malabar in 1933 and in Cochin in 1937 followed the pattern of the Travancore legislation, while in Malabar, where the Nambudiri Brahmins were most numerous, the principle of primogeniture was deprived of any economic importance by a law requiring the property of an illom to be divided equally among all the children of its head. Further regulations forbade polygamy and made men responsible for the maintenance of their wives and children, including in this case Nambudiris who had entered into sambandham unions with Nair women.

Thus, in little more than a decade, the traditional Keralan social order was legally dismantled. The most important provisions of the statutes, relating to the division of the tarwads, were indeed permissive rather than compulsory; even so, by 1947 a large majority of those who had once lived in matrilineal joint families had elected to divide the ancestral properties and

to live in individual families which inevitably became patrilineal. A few tarwads still remain, particularly in the Cochin area, but even they have undergone great modifications. I visited one in Ernakulam where the daughters still lived on the ancestral property, and their husbands with them, but each family had built its house within the compound and the men worked individually to maintain their wives and children. Today a Nair household is little different from one in the West, though a heritage of feminine independence still continues, and I have yet to meet the Nair husband or father who really feels master in his own house. Enough of the matrilineal tradition has survived to make marriages in Kerala much nearer to equal partnerships than those one encounters anywhere else in India, except among the Anglicized intellectuals of Bombay and Delhi.

The consequences of such a radical change in family organization was naturally wide and deep; as V. K. Sukumaran Nayar, a leading Keralan political scientist, has suggested, they changed not merely ways of living but also the nature of Keralan politics.

> When the matrilineal system broke up as the result of the impact of modernisation as well as social reform movements the structure of rural life collapsed in Kerala. The families which provided rural leadership were split into small units and the division of landed estates practically destroyed the landed aristocracy. When democracy, based on adult suffrage, was introduced into Kerala, there was no class in a position to take up the leadership.

Professor Sukumaran Nayar's viewpoint is typical of his own community; even today the Nairs believe that they could, if they were allowed, take the lead in Kerala, and this explains their unusual predilection for political activity. Nairs are disproportionately numerous among the leaders of all Keralan political parties—with the obvious exception of the Moslem League—and the several mutually hostile Socialist parties which occupy the political wilderness between Congress and the two Communist parties are regarded, with some justice, as special Nair preserves. The very variety of the political settings in

which one encounters Nairs in commanding positions is in fact the best proof of Professor Sukumaran's thesis—that the break-up of the tarwads destroyed the unity of the one community in Kerala which had some traditions of leadership. The fragmentation of the tarwad can be taken as a symbol for the fragmentation of a whole traditional Keralan order which, whatever its faults, gave a cohesion to society that has not been replaced.

Thus the advent of political democracy in Kerala coincided with the completion of a vast social transformation. It was also accompanied by the realization that the growth of population had produced a condition of chronic economic crisis.

At the beginning of the century there had been fewer than 6,400,000 people in Kerala. But during every subsequent decade, owing to good public health services and to the absence of actual famines, both the rate of population growth and the expectation of life had increased far more rapidly than in India as a whole. By 1947 there were twice as many Malayalis as in 1901, and the density of population had increased from a relatively comfortable 423 to a crowded 800 per square mile. Since that time it has leapt forward to the present catastrophic figure of 1,200 per square mile, in a region where the proportion of village dwellers, dependent on farming and on cottage industries, is even higher than in the rest of India. Old men who remembered Kerala at the end of the Victorian era would talk to me of a time of rural prosperity when there was work for all and the landowners still felt a patriarchal responsibility to the men who tilled their fields. Perhaps their memories were gilded, but it is a fact that the real income of rural workers and their standard of living in India has been falling steadily since the 1880's, and it is certain that by 1947 in Kerala there was appreciably less land available to each cultivator, less employment for each land-worker, and less food in proportion to the population than had been the case at the beginning of the century.

These various developments played a great part in shaping modern Kerala. The rise of parliamentary democracy gave a special importance to the new type of caste movement. When votes began to count more than traditional social status, small

but formerly powerful groups, such as the Nambudiri Brahmins, lost most of their importance, while the communities that could marshal large numbers gained in political status. In Kerala today there are two Hindu castes and two non-Hindu communities each of which in its own way is as powerful as any of the political parties. The Christians form the largest of these groups, totalling about 25 per cent of the population; the Ezhavas follow them with 20 per cent, the Nairs with 18 per cent and the Moslems with 17 per cent. In other words, the four great communities comprise roughly 80 per cent of the population of Kerala, and no government can survive unless at least three of them support it. More than once an alliance of two communities has been sufficient to overthrow a government in Trivandrum. This means that the Malayalis have in fact a double system of political loyalties, to community and to party, and, except among the most dedicated Communists, community usually comes first.

But the Malayali is more than a member of a community. He is also inclined to be an intellectual individualist, impatient of discipline, and this tendency has been fostered not only by the spread of education but also by the break-up of the joint family and by the consequent tendency for each man to seek economic independence and to struggle even within politics for a better position for himself. These complementary temptations of self-seeking and of loyalty to one's own traditional community have probably been the most potent causes of the political instability which Kerala has endured ever since it took to democratic forms of government. And political instability in its turn had been one of the reasons why over-population and its attendant economic disorders are still unsolved problems of menacing magnitude.

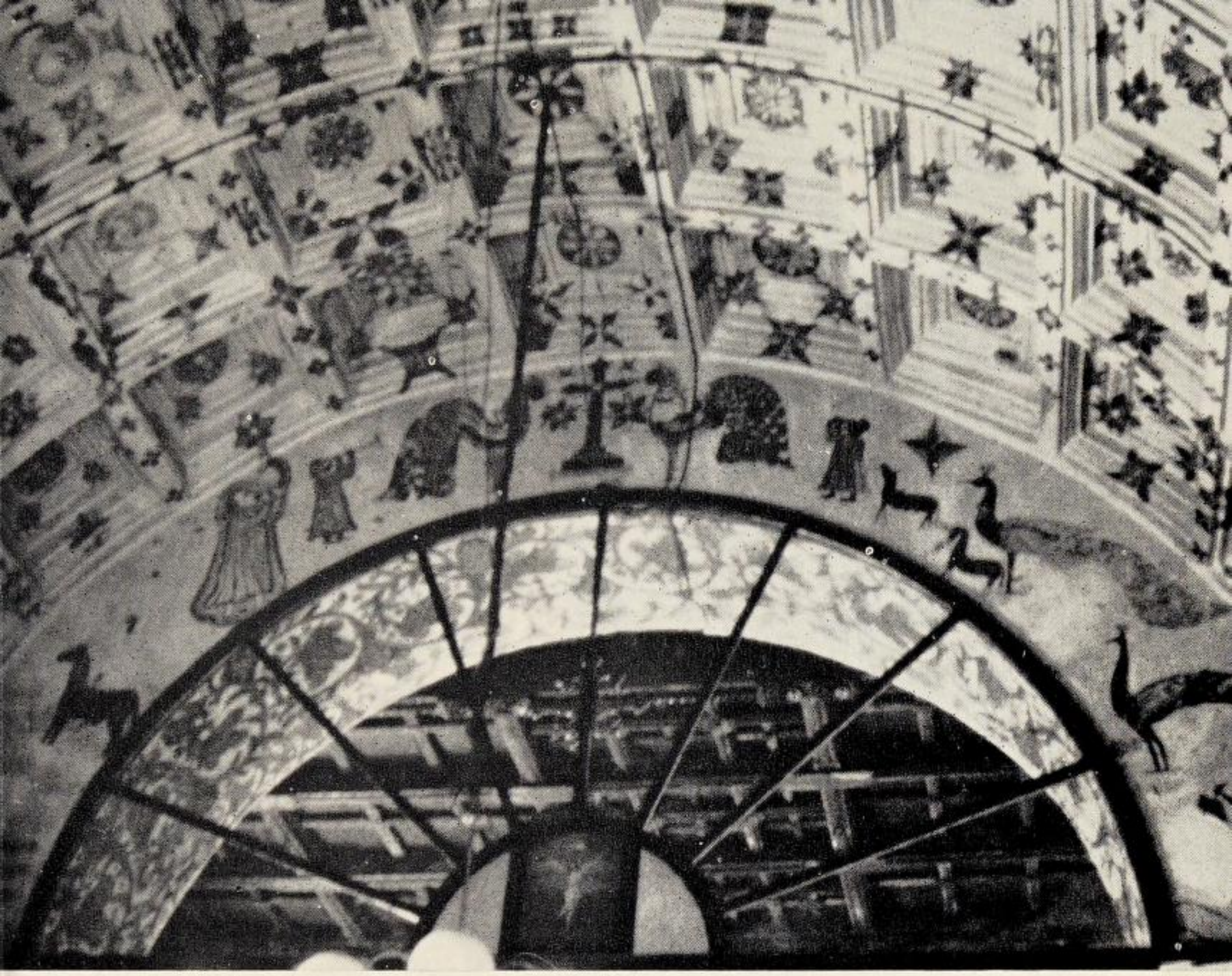
The political history of Kerala since 1947 has been complex and confused. Governments have risen and fallen with a rapidity emulating that of Ministries in the French Fourth Republic. There have been nine governments since 1947 and no less than three long interludes in which the state has been considered democratically ungovernable and has been placed under the rule of civil servants appointed by the President of India. Ministries

have been shaped to form a balance of community interests and have fallen because the balance has not been true. Tiny minority parties have headed coalitions, because the larger groups were unable to agree among themselves, and have been thrust aside unceremoniously when their usefulness has ended. And most parties, whether in power or out of it, have split and proliferated. At this moment, as I am writing, there are two different Communist parties in Kerala, two mutually hostile Congress parties, and at least four Socialist parties (one of them ironically called the United Socialist Party), not to mention Swatantra, Jan Sangh, and all the other parties of the right which maintain small followings in Kerala and whose day may yet come. A minor complexity, but one particularly evident to those uninitiated in Malayali politics, is created by the difficulty of charting one's way through the crowds of Nair and Christian politicians who share a small number of family or clan names. In the last elections no less than eight people bearing the surname of Nair and six Pillais were returned, as well as five Thomases and five Georges, while a whole constellation of Menons hold key posts in Congress, edit influential newspapers and represent Kerala in Delhi. To avoid confusion, I shall therefore present in as depersonalized a way as possible the kaleidoscopic pattern of Keralan politics over the past twenty years, and concentrate on the two main currents, the movement towards the reunion of Kerala, and the general leftward trend which has made the main contemporary public issue in the eyes of Malayalis as well as outside observers that of Communism in the context of Keralan poverty.

The union of the various regions of Kerala was almost from the beginning an aim of the emergent political parties, whether they inclined to the left or to the right. The various abortive attempts to form all-Kerala committees of Congress, the creation of a Kerala Communist Party, and the series of All-Kerala Trade Union Congresses which began in 1935, were all symptoms of a general desire to see Malayalis reunited within a single political state. The principal opposition came from Ramaswamy Aiyar in Travancore, but as a highly Anglicized Tamil he was

out of touch with popular aspirations, and the Maharaja of Cochin showed a much clearer sense of local feelings when, in July 1946, he issued a statement publicly expressing the hope that Travancore, Cochin and Malabar might be brought together in a single Kerala state. In this way the Aikya Kerala or United Kerala movement began, and the Maharaja, a retiring and scholarly man, found himself unexpectedly at the head of an enthusiastic following, who began to talk freely of the glories of the Chera past and even to revive the mythical vision of the reign of good king Mahabali. Under his patronage the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, the Praja Mandalam of Cochin and the Travancore State Congress called an all-Kerala Convention which took place in April 1947, some months before the departure of the British from India. The Communists skirmished on the edges of the movement, calling for what E. M. S. Namboodiripad termed, in the customary jargon, 'a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the national question in Kerala'; in fact their demands were not substantially different from those of the unMarxist and unLeninist Maharaja.

Before it attained power, the Indian National Congress had dutifully burnt incense to the principle of linguistic states, but Nehru in power began to have somewhat different views from those he had supported in opposition; his inclination was to re-examine the question and in the meantime to procrastinate. The first step towards the re-creation of Kerala had in fact nothing to do with the movement for linguistic states, but came about as a result of the policy of uniting former native principalities into regional groups. The Maharaja of Cochin agreed to retire into private life, and on 1st July 1949 the new state of Travancore-Cochin came into being, with the Maharaja of Travancore as Rajpramukh, a special title given to former princes who acted as governors of the newly created states. This step towards eventual unity, far from stimulating support for the Aikya Kerala movement, seemed to satisfy many of the southern Malayalis, who were having second thoughts about union with Malabar, and the United Kerala Committee was dissolved. It was only after the first Indian Parliament had been inaugurated in 1952



28. Kottayam: the Cheria Palli Church. The painted arch of the chancel and the coffered ceiling at the nave

29. Kottayam: murals in the Cheria Palli Church.
The Agony in the Garden

30. Cochin:
the Paradesi Synagogue

31. Cochin: the Ark in the Paradesi Synagogue, with the scrolls of the law-bearing crowns presented by a Hindu raja and a British Resident

that the agitation for linguistic states revived, mainly through the passionate campaign of the Telugus in the Andhra region for separation from Madras. The movement culminated in the fast unto death of Potti Srimarula, the Andhra leader, which led to Nehru's surrender, and to the appointment of a States Reorganization Commission whose recommendations included the unification of Kerala as a Malayalam-speaking state. The unification took place on 1st November 1956, when the Maharaja of Travancore gave up his position as Rajpramukh and the last pretence of princely rule came to an end. Certain border adjustments were made to fit the new state into the linguistic pattern. The most important of these was the detaching of the Tamil-speaking districts of southern Travancore and their incorporation in Madras. This was later to have grave economic consequences, for the flat, well-watered farmlands between Martandam and Cape Comorin had grown much of the Kerala rice crop since the days of the Chera emperors. But the most immediately sensational result of the formation of Kerala was the return to power of a Communist government in the election of 1957.

The reasons for this victory of the Left take us back over the political history of the previous ten years. In February 1948, the State of Travancore, still under princely government, carried out the first elections under universal adult suffrage in the whole of India. At this time Congress was at the height of its popularity, and undivided by the schisms which later were to take most of the convinced socialists out of its ranks into various small opposition parties. The Communists, on the other hand, were temporarily weakened by their defeat at Punnapara and Vyalar and by the failure of a number of minor peasant revolts which they had stirred up in Malabar and which had led to their being banned in that region. They contested the Travancore election in alliance with the small, recently formed Kerala Socialist Party; none of the united front candidates was successful, though the popular vote of 10 per cent which they received indicated a small but solid core of radical sentiment. Congress won 97 seats out of 120, and a separate linguistically organized

group of Tamil Congressmen in southern Travancore gained another 14 seats. Apart from a single independent who later joined Congress, the only real opposition was a communal one, represented by a group of eight Moslem League representatives.

The very choice of men for a first Travancore ministry was an admission of the power of the communities. Pattom Thanu Pillai, the Nair President of the State Congress, became Chief Minister, and the remaining members of his small cabinet were selected from the other large communities; T. M. Varghese was a Syrian Christian and C. Kesavan an Ezhava. Only the Moslems, relatively weak in Travancore, had no share in the spoils of political victory.

In normal circumstances, the Congress majority of 1948 would have ensured governmental stability until the next election. But Congress in India has never been a monolithic party, but rather a combination of balancing interests. In the country as a whole the balance has been kept by a series of brilliant political engineers from Gandhi to Kamaraj. In Kerala there have been no such engineers, and the disintegration of Pattom Thanu Pillai's magnificent majority began almost immediately he attained office. He himself was partly responsible, since, high-handedly, he enlarged the cabinet without consulting his colleagues. But the real struggle was between the Chief Minister's left-wing faction, which sought to introduce necessary land reform measures, and, on the other side, the Syrian Christian planters and the more conservative landowning Nairs. Pattom Thanu Pillai was too well respected for ordinary political manœuvres to be successful against him, so his enemies seized on a procedural issue, claiming that the President of the Congress movement should not at the same time hold the leading political office in the state. The Church leaders took a hand at swinging their followers into the line of opposition, the original Christian and Ezhava representatives in the cabinet threatened to resign, and on 17th October 1948 the government was defeated on a non-confidence motion initiated by members of its own party.

Pattom Thanu Pillai had been sacrificed because he was one of the few Keralan politicians who placed political ideals above

communal interests. He was followed in power by another Nair, T. K. Narayana Pillai—who more closely represented the landed interests within his own caste. Narayana Pillai's government was still in office at the time of the union of Travancore and Cochin, and he continued as Chief Minister immediately after the union, but in less than eight months he followed Pattom into political exile as a result of bitter feuding within his cabinet between the Travancore and the Cochin leaders. Regionalism was added to communalism as a disruptive element. The Ezhava leader Kesavan was now picked as a compromise Chief Minister because the powerful Nair and Christian political chieftains would not tolerate the leadership of one of their rivals. But few men of low caste have ever gained real acceptance in a position of political authority anywhere in India, and, though Kesavan tried desperately to be all things to all his cabinet colleagues, he was marked for sacrifice and would have been unseated if the All-India elections of January 1952 had not allowed him to leave with dignity.

The elections for the state governments on this occasion showed how steeply, in less than four years, the prestige of Congress had fallen in Travancore-Cochin as well as in Malabar. Though deeply divided, the opposition was far more powerful and persuasive than ever before. Pattom Thanu Pillai had not only left the government in 1948; he had also left Congress and had formed the Democratic Socialist Party of Kerala, which soon became a part of the nation-wide Praja Socialist Party led by Acharya Kripalani and Jayaprakash Narayan. Most of the progressively minded Nairs followed him into opposition. The Kerala Socialist Party had spawned a bitterly doctrinaire Revolutionary Socialist Party, which gained control of the trade unions of Quilon and in this way established a local electoral following. In the Alleppey region the Communists were in rebound from the nadir of military defeat at Punnapara and Vyalar, and they formed a left-wing united front with the Kerala Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Socialist Party.

The elections turned into a staggering public vote of censure on Congress for its failure to produce either stable government

or needed reforms. It emerged, indeed, as the largest single party, but with only 44 seats out of a total of 108, and its popular vote was reduced to 36 per cent. The Communists had won 25 seats, while 7 were held by fellow-travelling independents. Between them, the three Socialist parties had won 18 seats. For a precarious majority the Congress leaders in Travancore-Cochin depended on a small group of 4 Catholic independents and on the 8 capricious and regionally minded Tamil Congressmen from the southern districts around Nagercoil and Cape Comorin. In Malabar, which was still part of Madras State, the defeat of Congress was complete; it gained 4 seats out of 30, and the majority went to a Communist-Socialist electoral coalition. The fortunes of the election in Travancore-Cochin had left the Christians the dominant group in Congress, and a new ministry was formed under A. K. John. Within two years it also was out of office, defeated by the desertion of the Tamils because the Travancore leaders were not willing to agree to the secession of the southern districts to Madras.

A new election was held in February 1954. This time all the left-wing parties combined, the Praja Socialists entering into an electoral arrangement with the united front of the Communists, the Revolutionary Socialists and the Kerala Socialists. The popular vote actually showed a swing of sentiment back towards Congress (46 per cent as against 36 per cent in 1952), but the proportion of seats it gained—45 out of 118—was lower than ever. The Communists went down to 23 seats, and the various Socialist parties between them gained 31, so that, with a number of fellow-travelling independents, it would have been possible for the left-wing electoral alliance to form a coalition. Congress succeeded in preventing this. As the largest individual party, it first attempted to gain support for a minority government of its own members; having failed, its leaders adroitly broke up the left-wing alliance by offering to give support to a government of the Praja Socialists who, with 19 seats, had gained only third place in the election. The temptation of being Chief Minister once again was too much for Pattom Thanu Pillai; he broke his pact with the other left-wing groups, and, with three

of his party colleagues, formed a ministry which lived out its short life at the precarious mercy of Congress, destined to be deserted at the first sign of trouble.

Trouble came after eleven months. In the eyes of the conservative Christian wing of Congress, Pattom's government had shown signs of disconcerting independence by projecting radical legislation for land reform and the protection of labour. The opportunity for betrayal came—perhaps it was even manufactured—when a Tamil demonstration got out of hand in south Travancore and the police fired into the crowd. Panampilli Govinda Menon, the head of the Cochin clique in Congress, moved quickly, inducing some of the Praja Socialists to withdraw their support of the government and forming an alliance with the Tamil Congressmen which gave him the barest of majorities. Having ended Pattom Thanu Pillai's ministry with a no-confidence vote, he set up his own, but lasted no longer than his predecessor. A revolt broke out among the Travancore Congressmen, who accused Panampilli of corruption and of favouring the Cochinese. The charges of corruption were never proved, but those of favouritism were certainly true.

When Panampilli fell from office early in 1956, Nehru decided in disgust that Travancore-Cochin had proved so ungovernable by democratic means that Presidential rule should be imposed from Delhi, and this continued for a year until the first general election in March 1957 for the newly formed Kerala State. President's rule made very little difference to the actual process of administration in Travancore-Cochin, which, as in Fourth Republic France, had been sustained quite efficiently by the civil service. The core of this service consisted—as it does even today—of the officials who had served under the Dewan, Ramaswamy Aiyar, and who knew very well how to carry on a government without parliament; the succession of weak ministries added to the bureaucratic power. President's rule meant merely that the Governor and his civil service advisers revealed themselves openly as the managers of government they always were in practice. Rather surprisingly to outsiders, this type of government has been popular among the politically excitable Malayalis,

and Professor Sukumaran Nayar, in an unpublished lecture which he kindly made available to me, gives a series of very sound explanations for their attitude.

President's rule in Kerala irrespective of the personality of the Governor concerned has been popular with the élite of the state. This is due to several reasons. First, there is a feeling that a Governor coming from outside the state would be more impartial and objective than political leaders drawn from local communities. Secondly, there seems to be a feeling that government by a political party is not legitimate government as it is government by a faction. Thirdly, there is the feeling that politicians are corrupt and do not have the best interests of the state at heart. For the last hundred years or so the government of Kerala is the art of arbitrating between the claims of different interest groups based on religion and caste. The Maharajas performed this arbitral role with a certain amount of success. The politicians can never be arbiters; they can at the most push forward the claims of the groups that support them. It is the demand of the people for an arbitral role in the seats of authority that has made President's or rather Governor's rule popular.

Many people may have voted for the Communists in the 1957 elections that followed President's Rule for very similar reasons. The Communist Party, combining a strong ideological direction—at that time unweakened by faction—with a loyalty to something wider than the state of Kerala, may have appeared to offer the same possibilities of stability and impartiality as a Governor ruling by an impersonal code in the name of a President in Delhi, which to the average Malayali seems just as distant and almost as foreign as Moscow or Peking.

But reasons of this kind appeal mostly to the intelligentsia, and it was a popular vote that put the Communists in power in 1957. Running independently, they gained 60 seats out of 126, and, with the support of 5 fellow-travelling independents this gave them 65, a working majority. Their popular vote, including that of the independents, was 41 per cent, as against the 16 per cent they had gained in the last Travancore-Cochin election.

Congress went into opposition, with 43 seats and a popular vote that had shrunk to 38 per cent. The Moslem League, running on a purely communal platform in Moplah constituencies, won 8 seats. The various Socialist groups, who by now formed the Centre in the Keralan political spectrum, were represented only by the Praja Socialist Party, with a mere 9 seats against the total of 31 gained by Socialists in the previous election.

The Communist victory focussed international attention on Kerala, for this time the remote Indian state had scored not merely a first in Indian politics, but also a first in world politics. Never before—and never since—has a Communist government gained an overall majority in a democratic election. The event was interpreted outside India, and even in parts of India outside Kerala, as a triumph of the world revolution, as a sign that the people of Kerala had committed themselves to Communist authoritarianism and that the rest of India might quickly follow suit. The event, in fact, was of much more local import, both in its causes and in its results.

No more than a small minority of the Malayalis who voted Communist in 1957 were in fact card-carrying devotees. The Communist Party in Kerala has never been a mass organization of the same type as the Communist Parties in, say, Italy and France. In 1965 I found that the two factions into which the movement is now divided had a combined membership of about 30,000, and even at the height of its fortunes the party never attained a membership of much more than 90,000.

What drew the voters was not, then, partisan dedication. It was partly a general disillusionment with all parties other than the Communists. The Praja Socialists had been unwise enough to form a government without power and had been forced to take the blame for governmental violence during the Tamil riots of 1958; their failure infected the prospects of all the Socialist groups. The record of factionally torn ministries haunted Congress, and suspicions of corruption hung like stale odours around certain Congress leaders. Even the communal oligarchies that normally supported Congress were by now cool almost to the point of hostility. Both the powerful Catholic

Association and the Nair Service Society opposed the incumbent leader, Panampilli Govinda Menon, and even if the NSS leader Mannath Padmanabhan did not—as some stories current in Nair circles suggest—actually urge his followers to vote Communist, he certainly began his career of king-making by depriving Congress at this time of the support that might have turned the scales of election in many marginal constituencies. Many Nairs and even many Christians voted Communist at this election for the first and only time. To understand their action one must remember not only the general sense of frustration after a decade of parliamentary bungling (analogous to the frustration which made Pakistanis welcome Ayub Khan and Frenchmen support de Gaulle), but also the fact that since 1954 the line of Communist propaganda in India had changed direction. Opposition to Congress locally was combined with at least a pretence of support for Nehru nationally, and protestations of democratic intentions had taken the place of the old stress on insurrectionism. To many people in Kerala the Communists seemed a party which was not fundamentally unlike others, and they were ready to give it a chance where Congress and the Praja Socialists had so obviously failed.

These reasons no doubt account for the shifting margin of electors who were so important in deciding the 1957 election. But the rise in the Communist popular vote from 16 per cent to 41 per cent cannot be explained merely by the drifters. It pointed towards two changes of lasting importance in the balance of Keralan political power. First the inclusion of Malabar had brought into Kerala those rural areas, the homeland of Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan and many other formidable Communist militants, where the party had expended long years of arduous work to establish itself as the movement closest to the peasant. Secondly, the underprivileged communities throughout Kerala had by now realized that both Congress and the Socialist parties were dominated by Christian and Nair élites, and they had shifted the balance of their support towards the Communists. Most of the members of Scheduled Castes—the former untouchables who live by casual labouring—voted Communist. The

Ezhavas divided according to economic strata; the well-educated, prosperous members of the caste supported Congress, as did the hierarchy of the SNDP, but the labouring and tenant-farmer majority of the Ezhava community formed themselves into the largest reservoir of Communist support, more than a million in voting strength. Thus even the Communists have been unable to escape the communalism that besets Keralan politics.

Both the people and the politicians of Kerala sensed the special drama that attended Namboodiripad's assumption of power. They were aware of standing in the eye of the world. There was also a general feeling of hope, even among people who had not voted Communist, that a majority government with definite intentions might indeed usher in a new political era of achievement and progress. Many non-Communist journalists and newspaper editors assumed a stance of benevolent neutrality until the new government had a chance to prove itself by wise experiment and good administration. The Communists themselves treated the occasion with the special solemnity one devotes to the beginning of an epoch. Accompanied by his court of followers, Namboodiripad went first to Punnapara to pay homage at the grave of the Communist martyrs. Then, after taking the usual oath of office in Trivandrum, he broke precedent by calling a mass open-air meeting at Trivandrum and there the slight fair-skinned Brahmin, in his poor man's shirt and white mundu, stood before the people, and swore again, in his famous stutter, to redeem all his promises. It was an impressive beginning, fraught with an emotional fervour which perhaps prevented those who were present from observing that the cabinet which stood around Namboodiripad at the taking of the great oath consisted mainly of members of the higher communities which had always ruled in Kerala; among the eleven were two Brahmins, two Nairs, three Christians and a Moslem. The underprivileged castes who had provided most of the votes had only three representatives.

The Communist government lasted two and one-third years. Many Malayalis say it was the best government they ever had, and just as many say it was the worst. Its main virtue, in com-

parison with earlier administrations, was its cohesion and discipline. It fell from power, not through disintegration, but through assault. Its positive achievements were slight—a few minor reforms, a few small co-operative and industrial projects —less by far than the record of sweeping changes which the authoritarian Dewan, Ramaswamy Aiyar, left behind him in Travancore. The four members of the government, including the former Chief Minister, whom I was able to meet in 1965 in fact made no great claims for what they had done. Namboodiripad, sitting on the veranda of the decaying old house which is the Left Communist headquarters at Trivandrum, remarked that though India is theoretically a federal state, in practice it has grown steadily more centralized; hence the areas in which state governments can operate are limited, not only in degree and nature, but also financially. The taxation powers of states are slight, and for any large works they are dependent on grants from Delhi, which is grudging when policy demands it.

All this was true enough. Within the Indian Constitution it would be impossible for any state government to carry out a real social revolution, to establish a thorough-going Communist régime. The hopes which foreign Communists invested in Kerala and the fears of foreign anti-Communists were alike misplaced. All that the Communists could effectively do was to introduce measures that would consolidate and perpetuate their own power until the opportunity for more spectacular action appeared.

Their first step was to release all imprisoned Communists. Some were genuine militants; others were thugs by vocation, convicted of crimes of violence and likely to be useful in the months ahead. At the same time the Communists proceeded to turn the police as far as possible into a party instrument, a process which one of their leaders, A. K. Gopalan, described in this way.

> Despite opposition by certain top-ranking police officials, there has also been a change in the police since the Government declared that they existed not for suppressing the people's struggles, but for safeguarding their rights.

Translated from party jargon, this meant that the police were expected not to interfere in Communist violence, but to obey party orders without question.

In many rural areas, immediately after the elections of 1957, the local Communist cells assumed quasi-governmental powers, so that the normal channels of administration were paralysed. In parts of Malabar and northern Travancore a minor terror built up, not merely against the rich. In fact, those landowners who were willing to pay tribute to the party funds were left untouched, and even at times rewarded, since in many cases non-Communist tenants were expelled from land owned by fellow-travellers, in spite of the avowed Communist intent to end evictions. By the summer of 1958 many villages had lapsed into lawlessness, violence and robbery had increased dramatically, and a number of political opponents of the Communists were murdered without any action being taken against their assassins.

In the field of labour, party rather than class was what counted. The trade-union movement in Kerala has always been sharply divided by partisan loyalties. The Indian National Trades Union Congress, controlled by Congress, and the All-India Trades Union Congress, controlled by the Communists, are the most important bodies. Each has about 100,000 members plus another 100,000 members in independent Unions within its sphere of influence. The Revolutionary Socialist Party dominates the United Trades Union Congress, which has about 50,000 members, while the Praja Socialist Party controls the HMS, which has about 20,000 members, mostly in the plantations. During the Communist régime the treatment accorded to the half-million trade unionists varied strictly according to party loyalties. 'Voluntary' concessions in favour of the workers were wrung from the owners of factories with Communist-organized unions. Workers organized in Congress or Socialist Unions received no help from the government in their struggles for better conditions; their strikes were condemned as counter-revolutionary tactics, and they were often physically assaulted by Communist goondas. Nevertheless—or so the leaders of non-Communist unions told me—their followings actually increased

between 1957 and 1959 because of a general discontent among both land and factory workers with the failure of the Communists to bring about any substantial improvement in either wages or working conditions.[1]

The Communist government was finally overthrown by Presidential fiat on 31st July 1959, after the greatest Civil Disobedience campaign ever carried out in Kerala. Party apologists claim that the conspiracy to expel the administration by extra-constitutional means was already plotted in the first few weeks after the election. But, while the parties out of power certainly intended, like any other opposition, to take the place of the incumbent government at the earliest possible moment, there is no evidence of any deeper intent. In 1957, in fact, many of the organizations and newspapers which later turned against Namboodiripad and his associates were willing to give them a chance to prove their capabilities. It was the extent of the extra-legal powers allowed to the local party organizations and to the Communist trade unions that first aroused apprehensions that the Communists, once entrenched, would seek to maintain their power by other than democratic means.

Whether these apprehensions would alone have roused the great popular storm which eventually engulfed the Communist government was never put to the test. It was only, in fact, when the government began to attack the vested interests of the Church and of other powerful organizations that an effective alliance of its opponents came into being. The main issues of conflict were the Communists' Education Bill, their Land Reform Bill and their refusal—because of the support they enjoyed among the Ezhava community—to withdraw the special quotas for members of the lower castes in the appointment of government officials.

The Education Bill empowered the government at its discre-

[1] To give one example, the wages of male land workers in the Kuttanad rice-growing district increased by only 2 annas a day, or about 6½ per cent during the Communist régime, and the wages of women not at all, though the working-class cost of living during the same period rose at least 10 per cent. In other words, the real wages of the workers fell.

tion to take over private schools which it considered to be mismanaged; more important, it transferred to the Public Service Commission the selection and appointment of private-school teachers. This meant a tightening governmental control over about two-thirds of the educational establishments in the state. Some kind of legislation to control the private schools was doubtless necessary, since in Kerala education is a well-paying business. At the same time there was a real danger that an ideologically oriented administration would use its control to turn education into political indoctrination. It is not easy to disentangle the actual motives of those who most bitterly opposed the Education Bill, but it seems likely that a genuine fear of authoritarian manipulation of the schools (a fear strengthened by the Communist plan to introduce politically acceptable textbooks into the public schools) was mingled with a less idealistic intention of the Churches and of the Nair Service Society to maintain full control of the schools and colleges they owned and operated. The Land Reform Bill aroused the particular opposition of the Nair landowners, large and small, who foresaw that their already diminished rental income would vanish if the bill actually came into operation. Finally, the younger Nairs, who still regarded the public service as their natural inheritance and had the advantage of a relatively higher standard of education, were antagonized by the obvious intent of the Communists to favour the Ezhavas by refusing to make ability the sole criterion of admission.

The Education Bill received the President's assent and became law in February 1959. This was the signal for the opposition to unite and prepare for action. On March 5th, the Private School Managers' Association met in Kottayam and constituted a committee to fight the implementation of the Bill; the bishops of the Syrian, Catholic and Mar Thoma Churches instructed their clergy to preach opposition. At about the same time accusations of dubious dealing in connection with a rice deal with the Andhra government were raised by the opposing parties, and on March 11th the leaders of Congress, of the Praja Socialists and of the Moslem League issued a call for mass agitation against the

government. April 5th was observed as Anti-Corruption Day, and public meetings and demonstrations throughout the state called for the resignation of the ministry. The call naturally went unheeded.

It was at this point that the formidable Mannath Padmanabhan led his Nairs into the struggle and dramatically assumed the leadership. On 1st May 1959 a conference of all the community organizations was held at Changanacherry, and a Liberation War Council, the Vimochana Samara Samithi, was formed under Mannath's leadership. Organization began on every level, among trade unionists and students, among fishermen and peasants, among women and schoolchildren, while to counter the coming agitation the Communists organized their own followers into Education Defence Committees, shifted the notoriously brutal Malabar Special Police down to Trivandrum, which was expected to be the storm-centre of the campaign, and reinforced them with their own strong-arm groups of party thugs.

Through June and July the Civil Disobedience campaign mounted to its height. It began on June 12th with a state-wide hartal during which almost every business closed its doors, followed by an extraordinary variety of protest activities in which a very high proportion of the Keralan population took part. The non-Communist unions went on strike. The private schools were closed, and the public schools were picketed by crowds of children, who also impeded the running of the state-operated buses. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers courted arrest and 150,000 of them, including 40,000 women, went to prison. Jathas, or protest marches, were organized, and those led by Mannath Padmanabhan took on an anachronistic splendour, for Mannath himself would be carried at the head of the procession in a chair of state, shaded by elaborate silk umbrellas, with the traditional white horse of the Indian conqueror led before him by an escort of Nairs with drawn swords. He vowed to stable the horse in Namboodiripad's office.

The Communists replied with organized brutality. Twelve leaders of the demonstrators were killed by party assassins, and

sixteen people were shot by the police. Two hundred and forty-eight lathi charges were made, and hundreds of people, including women and children, were seriously wounded. But, far from destroying the Liberation Movement, such action merely fanned the enthusiasm of the demonstrators and many thousands of people who had hitherto played no part, including even leaders of the Ezhava community and outcaste fishermen from the sea-shore villages, joined in the campaign.

In spite of their own sense of righteousness, and in spite of the formidable defence forces they had organized, the Communists at this point felt the beginnings of demoralization. Every Malayali feels happier when he is in opposition, following the honourable occupation of tearing down those in office. Moreover, though they claimed to be the only true representatives of the people, the Communists were embarrassed to find an extraordinary number of the people passionately at odds with them. Achutya Menon, now leader of the Right Communists, was minister in charge of security arrangements at the time, and when I talked to him in 1965 about the Liberation Movement he admitted that, however he might disagree with it personally and ideologically, it was a genuine mass movement. 'The church bells would begin ringing, and then we would know there was trouble coming,' he recollected. 'The people would gather, and march out in great processions. First there were the men, and then the women, and then the children. I would stand in my office in the Secretariat, and I would see the crowds of children, eight and ten years old, surrounding it on every side. What could one do against children? I used to feel completely helpless.'

By the middle of July the Liberation Movement was still growing and the Vimochana Samara Samithi decided on a final round of struggle with August 9th the zero day, when 50,000 volunteers from all over the state, and from every class and community, including religious, political and cultural figureheads, would surround the Secretariat in Trivandrum and paralyse the working of the administration. On July 26th the first jatha, headed by the leaders of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, be-

gan to march south from Cannanore, gathering adherents on the way. The hour was approaching when the Communists must choose between massacre and defeat. Meanwhile, in Delhi, Nehru was going through one of his famous periods of hesitation. Congress leaders from all over the country, including his daughter Indira, begged him to act decisively. Even Namboodiripad urged him to decide one way or another as soon as possible, and there is no doubt—though they deny it today—that the Communists were relieved when the Governor reported that constitutional administration in the state had broken down, and on July 31st President Prasad dismissed the government and placed Kerala once again under the rule of the civil servants.

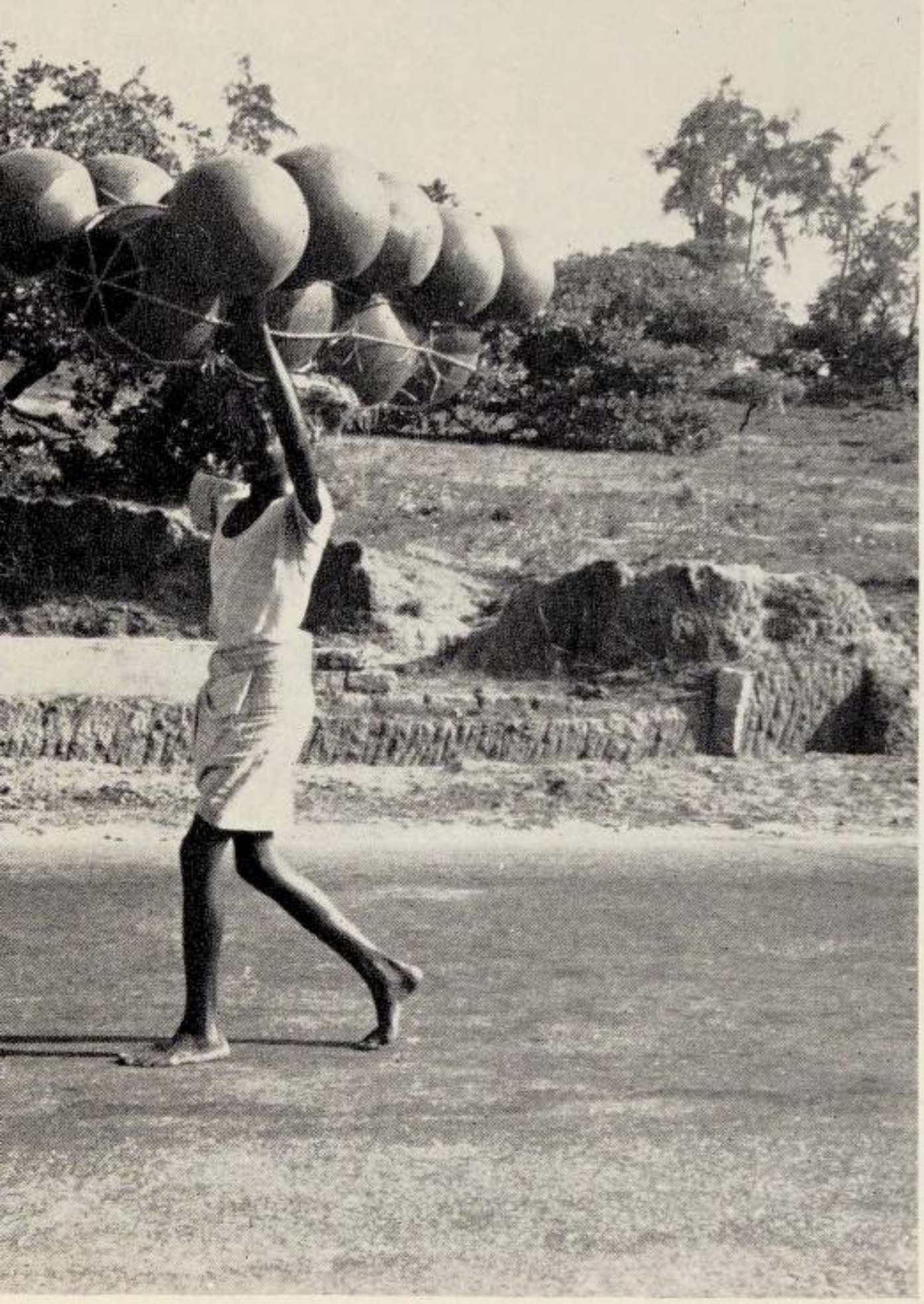
In Kerala today the Liberation Movement is recollected as an epic and exhilarating event, a splendid holiday in an unsatisfactory world, to be remembered as some men remember wars. But many of those who took part in it doubt if the action was really wise. They are still anti-Communists, but they argue that the campaign weakened respect for constitutional government, and that it provided a precedent which the Communists may some day turn to their own ends. Better, they suggest, to have given the Communists rope enough to hang themselves thoroughly with their own errors.

From many discussions with people of all parties who were engaged on one side or another during the weeks of the Liberation Movement, I believe that at the time most of the Malayalis were tired of the Communists, as they tire of all governments, and were glad to see them go. But within seven months their feelings had swung far enough to produce some curious results in the election of February 1960. This was the most sharply fought election in Kerala's history: 85 per cent of the electorate voted as against 66 per cent in the elections of 1957. Congress, the Praja Socialists and the Moslem League formed an alliance, and swept to victory on a platform whose only solid plank was anti-Communism. Out of a house of 126 members they won 94 seats, against 29 Communists and fellow-travelling independents.

This victory masked the inner paradox of the elections. Because of the polarization of party politics between Left and

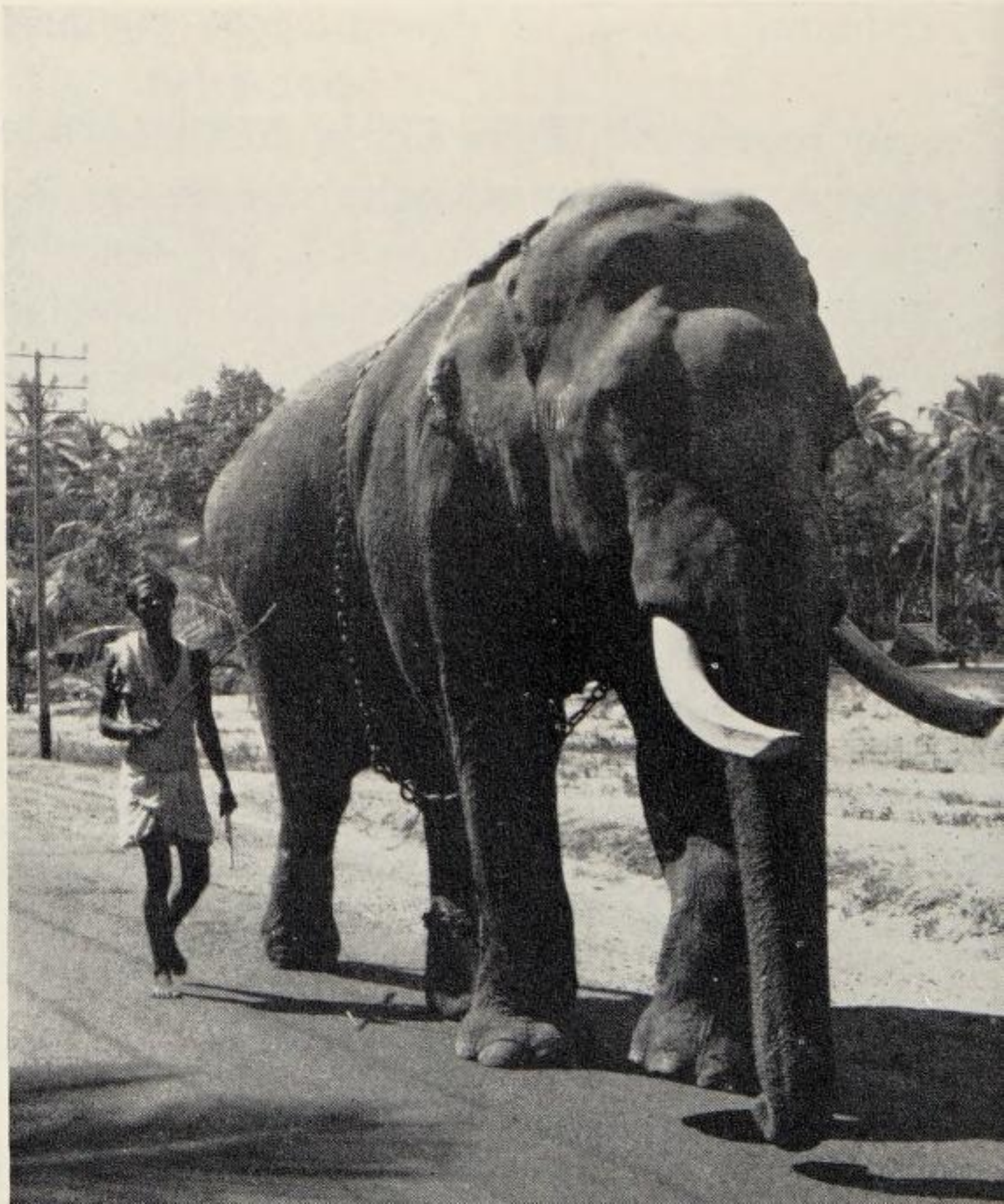
32. Transport in the backwaters

33. Transport by sea: a coastal sailing boat at Mahé



34. Transport by land:
the village potter
is his own
beast of burden

35. The working elephant: elephants, usually caught wild in the jungles of the Ghats, are still extensively used for hauling and piling logs



Centre-Right, the Communists appeared to have been completely routed. Yet popular feeling had swung so far back in their direction that they actually gained a million more votes than in the year when they went to power, and even, despite the enormous poll, increased their proportion of the popular vote to 43 per cent, the highest they have ever gained. The core of Communist support among the lower castes was as solid as ever, and may even have been strengthened by the arrogance displayed by Mannath Padmanabhan and his Nair followers in taking credit for the victory of the Liberation Movement. There may also have been a resurgence of distaste for the old Congress politicians who appeared once again on the hustings with all their past failures unredeemed. But the most potent factor was that their period in power had enabled the Communists to build up and finance their party organization, and that they had spent their seven months out of office proselytizing assiduously in the villages.

The elections of 1960 had one lesson for the politicians of Kerala: that if they would only abandon communal differences and adopt a strictly political programme based on a libertarian socialism, they could regain the loyalty of most Malayalis. The new government started off to a deceptively good start as a coalition of all communities, all religions, and all the major anti-Communist parties. For a third time Pattom Thanu Pillai, the Nair leader of the Praja Socialists, became Chief Minister; his two chief lieutenants were Congressmen, the Ezhava, R. Shankar, and the Syrian Christian, P. T. Chacko; a Moslem Leaguer was appointed Speaker. But the very care which had been taken to placate every community showed that the politicians of Kerala still thought in terms of caste and creed rather than of ideology, and that they were united only by a negative and unconstructive impulse, the shared hatred and jealousy of the Communists.

In a government so clearly founded in faction, a more or less rapid disintegration was inevitable. The Moslem League withdrew early, alienated by the refusal of Congress to take seriously its pretensions to be a political rather than a merely communal

organization. More deeply divisive was the antagonism that arose between Pattom Thanu Pillai and the Congress leaders, Shankar and Chacko. The Congressmen, who controlled half the seats in the legislature, resented serving under the leader of a minority party, particularly since Pattom was a deserter from their own ranks. Their attempts to dictate cabinet policy led to bitter disagreements, into which the national leaders of Congress were drawn repeatedly.

In 1962 the scandal of an open battle was finally averted when Lal Bahadur Shastri came on the scene as peacemaker, and persuaded Pattom Thanu Pillai to accept the governorship of the Punjab as a bribe for resignation. With his departure, the government came under almost complete Congress control, but this merely opened the way for internecine warfare within the ranks of the party. Shankar became Chief Minister and Chacko Home Minister, but the alliance they had formed against the Praja Socialists quickly broke apart, and the breach was widened by the efforts of the communally minded Nairs and Syrian Christians, who resented serving under a leader of low caste. Neither side observed any scruples in the contest that followed, and no one involved appears to have given a thought to governmental unity. Chacko accused Shankar of corruption; Shankar magnified a minor incident into major scandal when Chacko failed to remain on the scene of an accident in which he was involved when driving a State car in rather compromising female company. Chacko was forced to resign, and immediately afterwards died of heart failure. It was a Pyrrhic victory for Shankar; Chacko was represented by his followers as a martyr to political vindictiveness, and Mannath Padmanabhan, the Ezhava leader's bitterest enemy, now began to manipulate behind the scenes and organize the opposition within Congress. On 10th September 1964 the government, which four years before had begun with such deceptive promise, collapsed as a victim to Keralan factionalism when 15 Congress M.P.'s of the Chacko faction crossed the floor to join the Communists and Praja Socialists in a non-confidence vote.

For the third time Kerala came under President's Rule as the

parties and the factions within parties prepared for the elections which took place in March 1965. The schism in Congress was perpetuated when the followers of Chacko, supported by the conservative elements in the Nair Service Society and in the Catholic and Syrian Churches, formed themselves into a new party, the right-wing Kerala Congress. The opposition parties were no more united. The Communists were divided into the right-wing Communist Party of India and the left-wing Communist Marxists. The division, which was nation-wide, reflected the global disagreements between Moscow and Peking, but there were also specifically Indian issues on which the two factions divided; the rightists maintained the democratic façade of the late 1950's, but the leftists had reverted to the earlier revolutionary line and reiterated the old charges of counter-revolution against the Congress government in Delhi. The Right Communists included most of the intellectuals, and inherited the party apparatus—the big new secretariat building in Trivandrum, the subsidized newspapers, the Communist-led trade unions. The Left had the more popular leaders—E. M. S. Namboodiripad and A. K. Gopalan—and retained the loyalty of the rank-and-file peasant militants who formed the grassroots organization in the rural areas of Malabar. As for the centrist groups, the Praja Socialist Party had just been transformed into the Samyutka (or United) Socialist Party, and it managed to contain its internal tensions just long enough to fight the elections; then it divided and a new Praja Socialist Party emerged from the ruins.

The electoral alliances between these factional parties were not the least curious aspect of the 1965 election. The Socialists and the Moslem League both proclaimed an uncompromising anti-Communist line, but this did not prevent the former from entering into a state-wide arrangement with the Left Communists or both parties from making a special triangular arrangement with them in Malabar. The anti-Communist alliance of 1960 had completely dissolved, and factional interests prevailed.

The election was the most indecisive in Keralan history. Out of 133 seats the Left Communists gained the largest proportion,

but even they, with only 40, had less than a third; Congress won 36 and Kerala Congress 24, the Socialists 13 and the Moslem League 11. The Right Communists suffered a devastating rout from which they salvaged only 3 seats. The total Communist popular vote, including both factions and the fellow-travelling independents, had fallen from 43 per cent to a little over 31 per cent. Congress had suffered most from its divisions; not merely was the total of 60 Congress seats divided between two irreconcilable parties, but several constituencies were lost to the Communists only because Congress and Kerala Congress had divided the anti-Communist vote. With its increased popular vote, a united Congress might easily have obtained a working majority in the elections of 1965.

As for the Communists, the fall in their popular vote was no indication of an abrupt and real decline in their fortunes or in their prospects for the future. The Left Communists emerged with the prestige of being the largest single party group among the elected M.P.'s, and this half-success was won under the most unpropitious circumstances. The party had split only a few months before the election, and the Left dissidents had little time to create a new administrative and propaganda apparatus; in fact they were able to contest only 60 per cent of the seats, so that the proportion of the popular vote they actually gained was no true sign of the degree of support for them among the population as a whole. An even greater disadvantage—or so it appeared on the eve of the elections—was the fact that they had been denounced by Prime Minister Shastri as allies of hostile China and the majority of their candidates had been arrested under the emergency powers introduced during the Chinese invasion in 1962. Out of the 40 Left Communist M.P.'s, 29 were in Quilon jail at the time of their election. Such a degree of success under such adverse circumstances was evidence of the enduring loyalties which the Left Communists had fostered by their patient activities in the villages, and it was a reiterated censure by the poorest classes of the failure of Congress to provide an economic programme that would raise the standard of life in Kerala.

It was also a symptom of a peculiarly Malayali detachment from the national concerns of India. To the people of Kerala the Chinese threat has always seemed remote, as did that of Pakistan during the undeclared war of 1965. 'The only time we ever became interested in that war', a Trivandrum professor told me, 'was when a rumour began to circulate that a Pakistani plane had bombed Cochin Port. For a day we were full of patriotic indignation. Then the rumour was disproved and the war was ours no longer.' With such an attitude, the Malayalis were not impressed when Shastri identified the Left Communists with the Chinese imperialists, however just the equation may have been. Their attitude, largely shaped by southern isolation from the Hindu world of the north, was admirably analysed two years ago when Dr. Ramakrishnan Nair of the University of Kerala added a last-minute postscript on the 1965 elections to his admirable monograph, *How the Communists Came to Power in Kerala*:

> The average voter in Kerala was not convinced that the left Communists were resorting to any armed struggle or rebellion or that they were supporting China against India as alleged by the Government. Moreover the arrest and detention of a few members of the party instead of drastic measures against the party as a whole, produced the impression that the allegations and the arrests were only strategic moves on the part of the Congress government to put the principal rival of the Congress Party in Kerala in an awkward position on the eve of the election.

What the 1965 election did show, once one had taken account of the factional divisions which at this moment split both of the major parties, was a steady trend towards a consolidation of political strength in large parties of the left and the right. The Moslem League, which customarily gains less than 10 per cent of the seats in the legislature, had never hoped to become more than a sectional minority party which might one day be fortunate enough to hold the balance of power and to use it in furthering the interests of the Moplahs. The Socialists had once hoped to rule in Kerala, but by 1965 only the Samyutka Socialist Party was still strong enough to elect any representatives at all, and its

13 seats, compared with the 31 seats won by Socialists in 1954, showed that the Nair domination of these parties had eliminated any possibility of their emerging as a mass movement of the centre. The natural anarchism of the Malayalis is of course likely to keep alive even such extreme sectarian minorities as the Revolutionary Socialist Party, but the broader tendency appears to be for the masses of voters to move away from the smaller parties towards the absorptive extremes of the political spectrum; in Travancore, Congress gained in 1965 at the expense of the Socialists, while in Malabar there was a perceptible shift in the predominantly Moplah districts away from the Moslem League and towards the Left Communists.

The 1965 election brought no new government to power. The orthodox Congress could gain no support at all in forming a government, and refused to join in an arrangement to support a ministry of the rival Kerala Congress. As leader of the largest party, E. M. S. Namboodiripad approached the Governor and claimed the right to attempt the formation of a government; his proposal hinged on the willingness of the Central government to open the gates of Quilon jail to the 29 imprisoned Communist M.P.'s. The appeal was rejected, and almost a year passed before the detainees were at last set free. Once again the Governor declared Kerala ungovernable by constitutional means, and President's Rule was renewed, with every intention on Shastri's part of postponing an appeal to the people until the next All-India election fell due in the beginning of 1967.

It was during this political interregnum, in the winter of 1965–6, that I spent my longest period in Kerala. In the last and final chapter I shall delineate the problems, as I then saw them, of Kerala in the 1960's, the problems which make this tiny state, for all its uniqueness, so provocative a microcosm of the Asian world.

13

Behind the Political Curtain: Kerala Today

On a warm, luminous evening in December of 1965 I stood on the beach of Trivandrum watching the fishermen putting out to sea for the long night of work. Some of them went in great black canoes, driven through the surf by a team of twelve paddlers with a coxswain to operate the big steering sweep. But there were other fishermen on the beach who sailed out on their own, or sometimes with one small son, in the most primitive of all fishing craft, the catamaran—a kind of raft, consisting of four logs lashed together with coconut fibres so that the two middle logs are slightly lower than the others; in this way the outside logs form primitive gunwales, and the centre of the catamaran becomes a shallow well where the fisherman can place his lines, net, bait and whatever catch he is lucky enough to make by the time he comes home in the early morning.

I stood with a Malayali friend talking to two of the fishermen. How much would a man with a catamaran earn during the night? Sometimes he caught nothing at all, said one of them, a sepia-coloured man dressed in a scanty but dazzlingly white loincloth. Sometimes a man might catch a hundred rupees' worth of fish, said the other, but he himself had never done so, and it did not happen very often. Most often the fishermen came back with catches varying in value from 2 to 10 rupees.

'And, of course,' said the first man, 'we have to pay the rent for the catamaran.' It turned out that these fishermen were too poor even to possess the four roughly hewn logs and the bit of rope that tied them together into the caricature of a craft. The man who actually owned the catamaran was usually a merchant,

and from the fishermen he would exact a proportion of the catch. Even the fisherman who owned his craft was not much better off; it had usually been mortgaged long ago, and he paid out interest just as his neighbours paid out rent.

True, the fishermen I met that evening on the beach at Trivandrum were exceptionally poor, even by Keralan standards. A recent official survey of the economic condition of fishermen along the Malabar Coast revealed that their *family* incomes averaged 540 rupees, about £26; a research team of Norwegian doctors whom I encountered in Quilon had reached approximately the same figure. If one accepts five members for the average family, this means about 110 rupees per capita, whereas the per capita income for Kerala as a whole is 300 rupees.

But even the fishermen do not represent the nadir of Keralan poverty. One of the most unpleasant of all the local occupations is that of separating the coir fibres in the coconut husks which have lain rotting for months in pools of muddy, brackish water. It is done by women who squat before their piles of husks and beat them out with wooden clubs until the fibres are detached from the sodden and rotting pith; afterwards other workers card and spin the fibre. For this filthy and exhausting work I learnt that women were being paid 12 annas a day, or 9d. at the present rate of exchange. I found this figure so incredible that I cross-checked it with employers and union leaders and the officials of the Coir Board as well as with the villagers from whom I originally gained the information; the information was quite correct, except that I now found there were some women, old or sickly, who did not even reach the target of 12 annas and sometimes earned as little as 8 annas (or 6d.) a day. Children employed on spinning the fibre sometimes earned as little as 4d. a day.

Facts like these underlie the marsh-fires of political crisis in Kerala and form the real substance of its present-day life; they are facts which Communist, Congress and Socialist state governments have been equally powerless to change. Their meaning was summed up to me very clearly by Dr. Samuel Matthai, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kerala. 'Our great trouble', he said, 'is that we have tried to establish a legal and political equality

on the basis of extreme social and economic inequalities.'

Inequality—in status as well as living standards—is the aspect of his condition of which the average Keralan is especially conscious, and this sense of being the victim of some fundamental injustice helps to shape his attitude towards the world of the 1960's. If he belongs to the working majority of the population, he is conscious that others in Kerala are more privileged than he, but whatever his standing in the Malayali community, he is also conscious that Kerala itself, potentially so rich, is—in financial terms at least—the poorest corner of India, with a per capita income 10 per cent less than the Indian average, which in turn is one of the lowest in the world.

In the days before India became independent, Kerala was not so extremely overcrowded as it is today, and, in any case, there were two possible ways out of poverty which in recent years have ceased to exist. The Malayali might migrate, and many—particularly of the lower castes—did go to Ceylon, Burma or Malaya, often returning to their native villages in later years with enough savings to live the rest of their lives at the very simple level of existence which satisfies most people in Kerala. Since the war, however, the newly independent countries of Asia, conscious of their own population problems, have closed their borders to immigrants, and as—unlike other Indians—the Malayali has little taste for life in the great cities, such as Bombay and Calcutta, he is inclined to stay at home in his already over-populated village.

The other way of escape was through education. From the 1890's onwards Kerala had a good start over the rest of India in this field, and at the time of India's liberation Malayali graduates had spread all over India, in the public service and in colleges, in broadcasting and newspaper offices; until very recently, Keralan medical graduates found no difficulty in getting appointments outside the state, and even today, thanks to the traditional freedom of Malayali women, a very large proportion of the trained nurses in all parts of India are still girls from Travancore. But, as the level of higher education has risen in the rest of India, the exportability of educated Keralans has dimin-

ished. At the same time as opportunities have narrowed, Kerala, like many other parts of the world, is undergoing an education explosion. In the two years 1964 and 1965 no less than fifty new junior colleges were opened, mostly under private direction, in addition to the ninety already existing institutions of college standing. The output of graduates goes up year by year, but the quality of education declines proportionately owing to the shortage of good professors, and tens of thousands of ill-trained B.A.'s (at least 80 per cent of the students leaving college) are seeking employment at a time when the urgent need is for engineers, technicians and agronomists.

The consequence of the unbalanced development of the Keralan educational system is that the physical distress of the half-literate fishermen is paralleled on another level by the mental frustration of the educated unemployed. No one has yet estimated accurately the proportion of Kerala university graduates who find themselves either jobless or forced to accept work in which their education is wasted. But a very significant pointer was provided by a recent survey of the educational standing of municipal bus conductors in Trivandrum. A majority of them, it turned out, were B.A.'s and some were even M.A.'s, men forced into jobs they despised for lack of any employment commensurate with their training. Those who do find employment as teachers are little better off. Only recently has the minimum salary for rural primary-school teachers risen to 120 rupees (£6) a month, and I met secondary-school teachers earning less than 200 rupees a month.

Though education so often leads into an occupational impasse, it is still for a number of reasons ardently desired by Malayalis. It provides status. A doctorate in Kerala is almost as effective as religious conversion in neutralizing a man's caste origin, and it greatly improves his prospects of making a profitable marriage if he belongs to one of the communities such as the Christians, who still maintain the dowry system.[1] Every Malayali wishes to

[1] A Syrian Orthodox plantation owner lamented to me that it had cost him 85,000 rupees to finance the marriage of three daughters to men with professional qualifications.

see his son elevated through education to a position higher than his own, and working-class people will often make great sacrifices to achieve this end; the most striking example I encountered was that of a messenger in a government office, with a salary of 80 rupees a month, who had sent four sons to college. Thus there is a collective ambition at work which strives to create an educated and white-collared middle class for which there is as yet no economic basis.

Yet there are more laudable motives than mere ambition in the Keralan longing for education. 'We have a zest for learning which will not and should not die down,' the Maharaja of Travancore remarked to me. And indeed the Keralans strike one immediately as an exceptionally intelligent people, and this impression is reinforced as one becomes aware of their devotion to discussion and their inclination to value individuality of thought. 'We Malayalis love to argue,' a Communist leader said to me in a presumably unguarded moment. 'We like to have different opinions and to discuss them. It is part of our life.' Education has provoked and sharpened this tendency, which in turn has led to an extraordinary thirst for knowledge. It is shown in the proliferation of schools in the villages, even if in many cases they are only open-sided sheds where for lack of paper the children write, as of old, on palmleaves. It is shown in the four thousand well-used libraries that are scattered over Kerala, most of them in the villages. It is shown in the newspaper readers in the teashops, and in the popular weekly magazines filled with informative articles which sell in editions of hundreds of thousands. It is shown, above all, in the rapid growth of a vernacular literature and a popular drama that have broken away completely from the formalism of the tradition associated with the temples and the princely courts which in the past were the centres of the arts.

This trend is so significant that it is worth a brief digression. In its origins, modern Malayalam literature was a direct product of the introduction of Western education during the 19th century. The pioneer vernacular novels published during the 1880's and 1890's were modelled on the works of the English Victorians, but during the 1920's and 1930's the movements of

social and political protest began to affect both literature and the theatre, with the result that, while poetry remained largely formalistic and detached from everyday life, the novel, the short story and the drama developed in a realistic direction. Until the 1950's, when the literary intellectuals began to grow disillusioned with the Communist Party, the influence of Marxism was very strong, and, turning away from English influences, which were associated with foreign domination, the Malayali writers began to find their models among the French and the Russians. The works of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorki and Chekhov, and of such French writers as Zola, de Maupassant and Romain Rolland became available during this period, and though they were read at third hand, having been translated into Malayalam from English, they made a great appeal to the younger writers of the time.

The story and the short novel were the forms which Keralan writers found most suitable, and the association of the most vital writers with the revolutionary movements of the time, even though it was in most cases temporary, left its mark on the kind of fiction they wrote. The novel of village life, delineating struggles against social oppression and social prejudice, was for long the most popular form, but in recent years an existentialist trend, developing the theme of rebellion against the human condition, has become more fashionable. There has been little formal experimentation, and the kind of sophisticated irony developed by some South Indian writers who use the English language, such as R. K. Narayan and Bhalchandra Rajan, has not been imitated by Keralan novelists. The tradition of Malayalam writing seems to be a developing one, proceeding towards greater complexity and subtlety; its best works have been produced in the past quarter of a century by such writers as Kesava Dev, Muhammad Basheer and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, whose *Chemeen* is a small masterpiece of romantic realism.

The work of these writers is still almost unknown outside Kerala, for little of it has been translated into either English or the other languages of India. Yet it is read very widely at home, and some writers have become prosperous as a result of their

local popularity. Kesava Dev, for example, told me that his first successful novel, *From the Gutter*, which he wrote in half-starvation, brought him 100,000 rupees, in Keralan terms a small fortune. Successes of this kind are, of course, unusual, but, thanks to the many libraries which buy every book printed in Malayalam, even the least successful books, once they are published, have reasonable sales, rarely less than 5,000 and often more than 10,000 copies.

Publishing in Kerala is rather untypical, since, though the leading newspapers bring out a few books as a gesture to literature, most works of quality are produced by the highly successful Writer's Co-operative in Kottayam. The Writer's Co-operative is modestly subsidized by the State government, but it is controlled by the members, who include most of the active professional writers in Kerala. It was founded in 1945, and since then it has published more than 1,800 titles; in 1964, the last year for which I could obtain definite information, the list consisted of 167 books, half of them fiction, and the rest divided between poetry, criticism, drama and didactic works of various kinds. Almost all the books are printed cheaply, in paper covers, and priced at 4 or 5 rupees, but the high royalty rate of 25 per cent makes it possible for an author to receive a return on his book—usually at least 6,000 rupees and frequently very much more—which compares well with the average royalties on a book published in England. Writers also have a ready source of income in meeting the considerable demand for new plays from the widespread amateur theatrical movement in Keralan towns and villages, and some of them have profited by the local film industry, which is still small by Indian standards, producing fifteen or sixteen Malayalam features each year in studios at Alwaye and Trivandrum. Thus it is possible for a substantial minority of authors to earn incomes from their writings at least as high as those of other professional men in Kerala where, to give only two examples, a government doctor is paid 400 rupees a month and a professor starts at 600 rupees (about £29).

Apart from its intrinsic interest, the movement for a vernacular literature in Kerala is an important facet of the intellectual

activity of the Malayalis, a positive, creative aspect which complements the frustrations of so many men educated to expect a better standard of living than that which satisfied their ancestors, and destined to be disappointed. 'Behind all our political problems', V. M. Nair, editor of Kerala's largest newspaper, *Mathrabumi*, said to me, 'you will find the contradiction of empty bellies and active brains.'

Such frustrations certainly give a dual form to all public expressions of discontent in Kerala. The food agitations of the winter of 1965–6 provide an excellent example. The shortage of rice was a reality; it had grown steadily worse until the ration was reduced to 4 ounces per person per day. But the actual shortage was not so bad as the ration suggested; there was a flourishing black market in rice brought over the borders from Madras and Mysore, and the price of grain bought illicitly was so little above that in the legal market that those who could normally afford rice and were willing to take the slight risk involved in breaking the law had no difficulty in keeping up their diet. And the many who could not in any case afford rice—and to them I shall return—would not be helped by a higher ration.[1]

The food agitations occurred, not because rice was scarce, but because the reduction of the official ration gave the political parties an opportunity to stir the people out of the mood of

[1] I should emphasize that there was no pre-famine situation of the kind that existed early in 1966 in parts of Orissa. Tapioca was available in abundance, and in every large town there were warehouses well stocked with wheat—both grain and flour—supplied by the United States and distributed by Indian government agencies. But one of the areas of behaviour in which the Malayali is most conservative is that of food, and to him rice is a prestige food. A man who eats it habitually would be ashamed to eat tapioca or millet, and more than one well-meaning political leader on the Malabar Coast has lost his following by talking indiscreetly about the nutritive value of a local dish of tapioca and fish. The Communist government of 1957–9 earned more mockery than gratitude by setting up a factory for making an artificial rice called 'Macroni', and since then the Party has found it politically expedient to talk only about real rice. Even wheat is despised as a food eaten only by North Indians. In Kottayam I found the District Collector and other high public officials engaged in a losing campaign to encourage people to buy wheat flour; it was sold for just over half the price of rice, but still the rice-eaters would not touch it.

acquiescence which more than a year of President's Rule—since the autumn of 1964—had created. The left-wing parties started the movement, and both of the mutually antagonistic Congress groups were forced to join in—even though it meant criticizing the Central government of Mrs. Gandhi—for fear of losing ground during the vital year of political manœuvring that lay ahead before the All-Indian elections of 1967.

It was a movement that appealed, not to the very poor, who ate tapioca instead of rice and in any case would vote for the Communists, but to the educated youth of the middle classes who were seeking some issue around which their frustrations might crystallize. Early in 1966 I watched demonstrations in Ernakulam, Trichur and Calicut. In none of them did working people or people over twenty-five plan any part. They were carried out almost entirely by students of various ages. College students formed the backbone of the movement, and among them Communists were undoubtedly the principal organizers and leaders. In addition to mobilizing those students who had immediate cause for discontent, since they feared graduation without opportunity, the agitators had learnt from the example of the Liberation Movement of 1959, and organized large mobs of schoolboys between ten and sixteen years old, who stopped the buses and blockaded the streets. Since we were using a State car at this time, we were once mistaken in Trichur for the party of a visiting minister from Delhi, and were surrounded by one of these juvenile mobs; we were extricated from our predicament by some of the older students who reasoned with their companions that we were foreigners and therefore not responsible for the shortcomings of the authorities. A few moments later the same mob burnt down a stage in a stadium across the road, and similar companies of roving juveniles burnt buses in Trivandrum, wrecked the premises of a pro-government newspaper in Ernakulam and in the same town broke the plate-glass windows of a new hotel operated by North Indians. But on the whole their proceedings were relatively harmless; Malayalis, even in crowds, fight mostly with their voices, and as far as I know the only people seriously injured during the whole of the

1966 rice demonstrations in Kerala were the victims of scared lathi-swinging policemen.

The most important aspect of the 1966 rice demonstrations in Kerala, which brought worried ministers hurrying from Delhi, and eventually inspired Mrs. Gandhi herself to a peacemaking mission, was that they taught the malcontent youth of the Malabar Coast, who yearly become a larger segment of the population,[1] how much power they can wield by giving emphatic mass expression to their sense of frustration. A high degree of education without the ability to fulfil the expectations that education nurtures is one of the most explosive factors in Kerala today, and all the more explosive because the very group which experiences the consequent sense of frustration will provide that body of uncommitted voters whose support is essential to the party—Congress or Communist—that will rule Kerala in the future.

Up to 1959 a large proportion of this group supported the Communists, who for years dominated the student organizations in most Kerala colleges and even in the secondary schools. During the Liberation Movement educated youth was caught up in the enthusiasm of the anti-Communist trend, and in consequence the Communists lost control of the students in most colleges; their sole remaining stronghold in 1965 was, ironically, that highly traditionalist institution, the College of Ayurvedic Medicine in Trivandrum. During the demonstrations of 1966, however, there were signs that the Communists were again gathering support among the more militant sections of the middle-class youth.

While the Communists—at least when out of power—can usually turn to their own ends both middle-class and lower-caste discontents, Congress is hampered by its past and present associations. Even if the leaders of its warring factions eventually overcome their differences and reunite their party, they will suffer inevitably, not only from the poor record of past Congress

[1] From 38 per cent in 1951, the proportion of Malayalis under 14 had increased to 43 per cent by 1961 and, though the life-expectancy has risen sharply, more than half the population is under 18 years of age.

36. Fishing by shore-net at Vijinjam: the net is spread by boat and then hauled in to the beach by the whole community

37. Dip nets at Fort Cochin: in name (Chinese nets) and in form these

administrations, but also from the treatment which Kerala has received at the hands of the Congress-dominated Central government in Delhi. Every Keralan I met, whether he was Communist, Socialist, Congress, or politically uncommitted, subscribed to the view that 'the men of Delhi' had completely failed in their duty of assisting Kerala to solve those peculiar economic problems which grow more intense from year to year.

How far Kerala's problems in fact are peculiar is of course a subject of disagreement. 'You must not fall into the error of thinking of Kerala as separate from India,' said E. M. S. Namboodiripad when I talked to him. 'We have no different problems. Our problems are those of India.' It was a salutary warning, but it was also only a half-truth, since many of the problems of Kerala arise from the fact that for so many centuries it was economically oriented away from India. Now, however, it is not only politically united with India, but is also subject to economic policies originated in Delhi with a view to the general Indian situation, and this alone creates for the Malabar Coast the special problem of readjustment from the economics of regional isolation to those of sub-continental participation. And even those difficulties which Kerala shares with other Indian states it usually feels with greater intensity.

'Our most serious sickness is neither tuberculosis nor cholera,' said the yellow-robed Swami Tapasananda, as he led me through a maternity ward of the Ramakrishna Hospital he directs in Trivandrum. 'It is childbirth.' And if education represents one pole of the field of Keralan frustration, population represents the other. As I have already remarked, the population of Kerala is now 1,200 per square mile; it has almost tripled since the beginning of the century, and it is still growing at the rate of 25 per cent per decade. Up to the present all efforts to control the increase have been ineffectual, owing partly to the determined opposition of both Syrian and Latin Christians to birth control, and partly, as a local woman doctor argued in my presence, to an extreme modesty which makes it difficult for the average Hindu woman to discuss anything related to sex. The director of

a modern hospital run for their employees by the tea planters at Munnar told me that he had established a Family Planning Clinic, but that despite all his efforts to interest the 15,000 women under his care, after several months only 58 had agreed to be fitted with contraceptive devices. If such a proportion—about 1 in 250—represents the degree of success which planned control has so far achieved in Kerala, it is obvious that for a long time ahead the population will continue to grow at its present disastrous rate; only among the relatively prosperous middle class is it beginning to level off. Already Kerala is more thickly populated than any other part of India or than the most highly industrialized countries of Europe; only the miniature urban states, like Monaco and Vatican City, which in any case are political freaks, have more people to the square mile than Kerala. The statistics become even more terrifying when one remembers that a third of the state is jungle, mountain and inland water. This brings the density of population to 1,800 in the cultivated areas; in the Alleppey district, where most of the people are still villagers living by the rural coir and copra industries, it has already reached 2,600, and there are villages in Malabar with 5,000 people crowded into every square mile of coconut grove.

So many people create an almost intolerable pressure on the land. Keralan holdings have been growing steadily smaller since the tarwads and the illoms began to break up a generation ago, so that the ceiling of 25 acres set on property holdings by the land reform laws is virually meaningless; only the plantations in the hills exceed 25 acres, and these are covered by special legal provisions. There is now less than a third of an acre for every rural inhabitant of Kerala, and in practice, apart from the plantations, the average area of a holding in the state is about an acre. Considerably more than a third of the cultivated area is used for non-food crops or for foods which are mainly exported, and, while Kerala is self-supporting in fruits, vegetables and tapioca, it only grows about half the rice its people demand. Because of the scarcity of land there is little cattle-breeding; one can travel for miles along coastal roads where even buffalo are so scarce that goods are transported on human heads or by coolie-

drawn carts. This means that the ordinary Keralan diet lacks the animal fats in the form of ghee and curds which are available to village people in other parts of India, while, since there is little cultivation of lentils (dal), it is also deficient in the vegetable proteins which are a familiar feature of North Indian meals. Apart from these special deficiencies, the daily food even of a rice-eating Keralan is low in general nutritional value, standing —at 1,500 to 1,700 calories—below all the generally accepted standards of sufficiency. One can only wonder at the mental and physical energy which in these circumstances the ordinary Malayali displays.

It is not merely that the crowding of the land limits the availability of food. Up to now, in fact, there has always been enough for survival. Kerala has been a land of steady malnutrition rather than a land of famine; as one is told constantly, there is always a neighbour with a bit of fish or tapioca to stand between a family and death by starvation. But the situation limits the possibility of earning enough to live very far above the sheer starvation mark. How remote the political demands in 1966 for a 12 ounce daily ration of rice were from the actual life of the submerged third of Kerala's population can be seen by making a simple calculation. For a family of four, such a ration would mean a kilo and half of rice a day, and, as rice was then priced at Rs. 1.70 a kilo in the legal market, this would have meant an expenditure of Rs. 2.55 a day for this single item of food alone, leaving out of consideration clothing and other household expenses. One does not have to go to such extremes of poverty as the fishermen or the women employed in the coir industry to realize that for the great majority of Malayalis an expenditure of this kind would have been impossible. Three-quarters of the people of Kerala are engaged in either industry or agriculture. It is true that the aristocrats of industry, such as the welders working at the new oil refinery at Cochin or the workers in the fertilizer and chemical factories at Alwaye, can earn between 10 and 18 rupees a day. But there are very few of these, and so many people are engaged in primitive workshops that the average daily pay for an industrial worker is a mere Rs. 2.90 a day. As for the

agricultural workers, the men earn about Rs. 2.25 a day, and the women a great deal less.

From this it is obvious that for most Keralans, even if they worked six days a week throughout the year, a diet of tapioca, fish and jackfruit, with rice as the occasional luxury, is all that is possible. But even full employment is available to only about half the people of Kerala. Thirty-five per cent of them are drastically underemployed. Of those the land-workers in the fertile rice-growing region of Kuttanad are typical. In a year, according to a report of the Government of Kerala Statistical Department, they worked an average of 201 days, which means an income of 450 rupees, or about Rs. 1.25 a day; if the wife also worked, at her lower rate of wages, this would mean an average total family income of 2 rupees a day. Even less fortunate are the million Keralan workers, approximately 14 per cent of the labour force, who are completely unemployed in a land where there is no dole. They survive, mostly, through family and caste solidarity and, in the last resort, through charity.

Even the farmers who work their own land are very often no better off than the landless labourers. Owing to the continual sub-division since the break-up of the tarwads, 60 per cent of the holdings in Kerala are less than an acre in extent, which means that they do not either grow enough to make a family self-subsistent or produce sufficient cash crops to buy the necessary food in the market. Such proprieters must either compete in the overcrowded labour market or live at the same level of poverty as the underemployed.

The consequence of such a situation can be seen not only in the kind of resentment I have already described, but also in the general state of health of the people. Thanks to the extraordinary cleanliness of the Malayalis, such widespread Indian sicknesses as cholera and typhoid are now comparatively rare, and the willingness of the people to accept medical advice has resulted in a diminution of tuberculosis and even in a decline of the disfiguring sickness of elephantiasis, which until recently was very widely spread along the backwaters in the sandy coastal regions.

Diseases preventable by ordinary prophylactic means are, in other words, steadily retreating. But those which are the result of want persist, and are probably even more serious than they were a generation ago. I spent a day at a Norwegian-directed hospital and clinic near Quilon which ministered to a population of about 17,000. The people attended willingly, and the director and three other doctors (two of them Indians) dealt with about 90,000 attendances a year, enough to give a very good idea of the health of the coastal people—fishermen and coir-workers. The director's estimate was that one-third of the children under school age, one-third of the pregnant women, and one-fifth of the children attending school, were suffering from anaemia due mainly to habitual malnutrition. During the monsoon season, when fishing almost completely stopped for three or four months, he remarked, it was quite common for families to go two or even three days at a stretch without any food at all.

Yet, strangely, these conditions do not produce the kind of despairing squalor one might expect. The sense of a people decaying in want and idleness which I used to experience in the mining valleys of South Wales or in towns like Jarrow during the thirties was not evident to me on either of our visits to Kerala. Of course, as Orwell remarked, poverty in a tropical country can never be quite so appalling as poverty in a cold climate. The sun is a great cleanser physically and mentally. But even in tropical terms there is an extraordinary difference between the poor Malayalis and their like in other parts of India. One does not even have to consider such extreme opposites as the land-workers of Bihar, who appear to have lost all hope and all human dignity in their desperate struggle to survive; one has only to cross the Ghats into Madras state, and compare the neglect and filth of the Tamil villages just east of the mountains with the cleanliness and order of Malayali communities, to get some idea of the spirit which, instead of making the people of Kerala resigned to their lot, makes them resentful, rebellious, but also anxious to transform their own existence. Despite the conservatism that characterizes some aspects of their lives, they are willing to accept what good the modern world has to offer.

Education, public health schemes, modern agricultural methods: none of these meets the obscurantist resistance which it encounters in other regions of rural India, where whatever is alien to tradition is feared and hated; even the present slowness of Keralans to adopt family planning is more often due—paradoxically—not to their loyalty to ancient India, but to the allegiance which so many of them hold to unIndian religions, and a change in Vatican policy might completely transform their attitude in this respect. Most Malayalis would like to see their state reorganized economically in such a way as to counter the effects of a rising population, and know enough to realize what this means. Indians outside Kerala are inclined to blame the state's economic backwardness on its own political chaos; Malayalis are inclined to blame the political chaos of the region on the failure of other Indians—and particularly of the Central government in Delhi— to give the assistance which Kerala needs to transform itself and which its people believe they deserve for their own particular contributions to the economic development of India as a whole.

Keralans argue that within the Indian economy they perform a special function—that of earning badly needed foreign exchange. Since this means that they are unable to grow more than a half of the food grains they need, they consider first of all that the rest of India, which benefits from their cash earnings, should meet the deficiency. But this, of course, would present only a partial and short-term solution to Kerala's difficulties. There would be enough food, but the curse of unemployment would remain. And there are few people in Kerala, of any party, who dispute that the only way to approach full employment and to dispel the haunting nightmare of steadily rising population, is to follow the example of Japan, and to combine intensive farming and fishery with rapid industrialization.

Intensive farming is probably the least important of the directions of improvement. The further benefits that can be wrung from agriculture are marginal and unlikely to affect profoundly the general economic pattern. Almost all the available land is cultivated, and the forests can now be cleared at the cost of per-

petuating an already alarming downward trend in rainfall (from 1960 to 1964 there was a cumulative decrease amounting over the five years to 33 per cent, and recent seasons have shown no improvement). It is true that some shallow edges of the back-waters can be reclaimed, while projects like the Y.M.C.A. centre at Martandam are working on the intensive cultivation of small plots around rural houses, which can materially increase the amount of food available to underemployed land-workers. A more important project than either of these is that now under way in the High Ranges of Munnar and in the highlands of Peermade, where a group of Swiss and Indian livestock experts are beginning to exploit the great unused meadows above the jungles, breeding new strains of cattle suited to Kerala, teaching modern farming methods, and transplanting hundreds of work-less families from the plains to begin the first real dairying industry in the state. But the additional food and employment likely to be produced by these changes can meet only a fraction of Kerala's requirements. More is certain to be gained by the in-creased use of fertilizers, which Keralan farmers have been quick to adopt when they can get them, and by increased irrigation; only about a fifth of the arable land in the state is at present irri-gated, and if the waters of the mountain rivers, which during the monsoons run quickly off the steep slopes of the Ghats, can be trapped and utilized more economically, much rice land which now grows only one crop a year can double its annual productivity. New Brazilian strains of tapioca which yield up to 25 tons per acre are also being introduced, and there seems little doubt that, if the Keralans could only be successfully persuaded to change their food habits and accept alternatives to rice—as the Japanese to some extent have done—the shortages of food could be materially reduced.

But Kerala's great underexploited natural resources lie not in land but in water—in the sea with its great potential fisheries and in the mountain streams with their promise of increased irriga-tion and power resources. Even today, using extremely primitive equipment, the fishermen of Kerala bring to shore a third of the fish and crustaceans caught in India. It is estimated that with

modern methods their annual catch could be multiplied at least seven times without depleting the resources. The shifting mud-banks created by the peculiar offshore currents breed vast quantities of prawns, many of which are already exported to the United States, while the rich deep-sea fisheries of the Arabian Sea have hardly been touched. Properly exploited, the sea provides a rich source of food for the Keralan people and a means of earning greater quantities of foreign exchange. Already, modestly, a revolution in the industry has begun through co-operation between the Norwegian and Indian governments. The Indo-Norwegian fishing project started at Quilon, experimenting with ways of increasing catches and of preserving fish for home use and export. At first, attempts were made to mechanize the locally made fishing walloms, but it was found that these vessels, which are made of planks sewn together with coir rope and then caulked, literally came apart at the seams through the vibration of outboard motors. The Norwegians then began to construct small power-driven craft, and found that with these the daily catches could be doubled and tripled. They also started a scheme for training young fishermen in modern techniques and built the first experimental ice-making and refrigeration plant for the Keralan fishing industry. They handed over this first project to a union of local fishermen's co-operatives, and then proceeded to Ernakulam, where they are now experimenting with the use of large trawlers for deep-sea fishing which can work from modern port facilities like those provided by Cochin harbour. Already, as a result mainly of the example set by the Norwegians, there are 1,000 small power-driven boats among the 20,000 fishing craft (not counting catamarans) of Kerala, and thirty privately owned ice plants have sprung up, as well as the first canning plants.

Yet for their growth Keralan fishing and agriculture both depend ultimately on the growth of industry. Shipbuilding yards are needed to provide the large craft, 120 feet long, which the Indo-Norwegian researchers now consider necessary for efficient deep-sea fishing. Increased production of chemical fertilizers is necessary to get the most out of the land that can be

cultivated. And, apart from the needs of the farmers and the fishermen, industry will have to be developed for its own sake as a source of employment and as a means of bringing to the Malayalis—once they are employed—those attributes of modest affluence which they are now learning to expect as minimal amenities—electricity in the home, bicycles and radios and sewing-machines, and, eventually, motor scooters; only the middle class yet dream of motor-cars. But for industry to expand in Kerala very much beyond the foundations laid by Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar in the 1930's, and modestly extended by subsequent Keralan governments, three things are needed—power, capital and raw materials.

The present power resources of Kerala provide only 177,000 kilowatts at the best of times, but the conservation of water resources in the Ghats is so inadequate that during the dry seasons only a proportion of the potential power is actually available, so that even those factories which already exist cannot work to their full capacities. At Alwaye in January 1966 I found FACT, the principal fertilizer-chemical combine in Kerala, working at half capacity, so that there was already a shortage of fertilizers in the rural depots. At Munnar, a few days later, I met anxiety among the tea planters because, in the middle of a good winter season, with plenty of green leaf, they did not know whether they could keep their factories operating since there was only enough water in the local reservoir for three days of power; the light showers we were then getting every evening each meant half a day's reprieve, but all the planters were longing for a week of good downpours to end their worries. And in February at Cannanore the biggest plywood, laminated wood and fibre-board complex in Kerala was already working on its own auxiliary generator, but the chief engineer did not expect to continue in this way much longer since diesel oil also was in short supply. When existing factories are already running at low speed, it is clear that before new industries can be started up in Kerala new sources of power must be made available. Fortunately, during the next five years, it is likely that two projects already in construction will change the whole electricity situa-

tion in Kerala. At Sabargiri, near the forest temple to the god Aiyappan, a dam is being built with American aid which will provide 154,000 kilowatts, almost as much as the present Keralan power potential. It is due to begin operation in 1967. An even more ambitious project is the creation of a vast artificial lake near the hill village of Moolamattam through the damming of the headwaters of the Periyar and two smaller rivers. This scheme, named after the deep Idikki Gorge where the Periyar will be stemmed, is being carried out with Canadian help. It is the largest of all the power schemes in the Western Ghats, and when it goes into operation in 1969 or 1970 it will have a capacity of 210,000 kilowatts; as well, incidentally, as providing a controlled water supply which will irrigate 150,000 acres of valuable rice land. These two projects will between them triple the power generated in the Ghats, and it is likely that Kerala will have enough for any expansion of industry that might be achieved in the foreseeable future.

The other two requirements for an expanded industry are more difficult to fulfil. Minerals, the necessary raw materials of any intensive industrial development, are not abundant in Kerala. It is true that there are quantities of some rather rare minerals, such as monozite, titanium and ilmenite, and that there is enough clay to maintain tile and pottery industries. But the more widely used base metals are absent or represented—as in the case of iron—by extremely low-grade ores. There are also deposits of lignite, but these again have not been found to be commercially exploitable. An aluminium factory established at Alwaye has to operate with imported ore, and a new zinc factory which is being established in the same industrial area with the assistance of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada will be using concentrates shipped from mines in British Columbia. However, when one considers the intricate and sophisticated industrial complexes which countries like Switzerland and Japan have built up largely on imported raw materials, shortage of minerals is in itself no insurmountable obstacle, particularly as some of the necessary raw materials are available in other parts of India. Kerala has the advantage of a

good supply of cheap and educated labour, and the example of Hong Kong has shown how this advantage can be used competitively in world markets until it becomes the foundation of a prosperous industry which in turn leads to a gradually rising standard of living.

But for factories to be built and for raw materials to be obtained from foreign countries and from other parts of India, a great deal of capital is needed. And Kerala has always been short of capital. In the British days foreign traders and planters were little interested in investing in heavy industries or in industries producing goods for local consumption. At best they would encourage the establishment of workshops or factories to give a primary processing to products which had been grown in Kerala for export. Such establishments as tea factories, cashew-nut processing factories and the workshops where coir was made into yarn and matting were typical of the kind of industry which foreign investors usually fostered up to 1947. Except for the tea factories, which have been steadily modernized, the predominance of such establishments has given to Keralan industry an extremely backward and primitive character. The work in cashew factories is mainly carried out by women who sit on the floor in the great sheds cracking open the shells and peeling the kernels to prepare them for their final roasting. A coir factory can be anything from a great compound where obsolescent wooden handlooms stand in long rows and creak away at weaving the familiar coconut matting, to an open-sided palm-roofed village shed which acts as a rope walk where gaunt women spin the coir fibres into yarn. Since independence foreign capitalists have been reluctant to invest in Kerala because of a long series of labour disputes; the election of the Communist government in 1957, with the ever-present threat of its renewal, naturally strengthened their disinclination to be involved in financial ventures on the Malabar Coast.

At the same time, because of the peculiar structure of Keralan society, local capital has always been scanty. The governments of Travancore and Cochin invested considerable sums of money in public works, including good road systems, and in building up

educational systems and health services unrivalled in the rest of India, and in Travancore, under the dewanship of Ramaswamy Aiyar, the state not only created the first electric power system in Kerala, but also started modern factories which would make use of the state's limited mineral resources, and even tried to encourage the establishment of privately owned industries by offering to invest in them. Thus, by the efforts of enlightened rulers and their ministers, the infrastructure of an industrial society was actually established in southern and central Kerala by the time India became independent and the native states were absorbed. But it was never fleshed out by the efforts of Kerala's private citizens. In India, financial power is very regionalized. It exists in the great commercial cities founded by the British—Bombay, Calcutta and Madras—where native capitalists grew up in the shadow of the Raj; it exists also in regions where there are flourishing communities of banias or native financiers who have built up large savings by lending money at high rates of interest. But commercially, in the British era, the small Malabar Coast ports were subordinate to Bombay and Madras and never became financial centres in their own right, while the Keralan social system, lacking a Vaisya caste, never produced a widespread Hindu community dedicated to financial manipulations. The Gujerati and Konkani merchants who settled in Cochin restricted themselves mainly to acting as middlemen in the export of Keralan products; and, though some of the Tamil Brahmins took to money-lending early in the 19th century, they never became financiers on the scale of the hereditary banias of North India. Later, as business in Kerala fell into the hands of the Syrian Christian community, they began to establish banks on the Western model, rather than family money-lending businesses, and habitually charged low rates of interest on the loans they made, a practice which—combined with the later development of Co-operative Banks—made it difficult for the comparatively few independent money-lenders in the villages to exact the high rates of interest which have been customary for many generations in North India.

For this reason great fortunes have rarely been accumulated

in Kerala since Tippu Sultan plundered the rajas. There are few millionaires on the Malabar Coast, and no Malayalis take their place among the ninety families which are said to control India's finance and private industry. Consequently, there has been very little local capital available for investment in Keralan industries. The great capitalists of North India, in their turn, have been discouraged from investing by the same circumstances that have repelled foreign investors—frequent strikes and the threat of Communist government. Only in the mid-sixties have the two great imperial clans of Indian industry—the Parsee Tatas and the Marwari Birlas—extended their attention to Kerala, the Tatas by building an oil and soap factory near Cochin to utilize local copra and an instant tea factory in the High Ranges near Munnar, and the Birlas by building a rayon factory at Mavoor near Calicut to utilize bamboo cut in the jungles of the Ghats.

The Birla factory, which I visited, is, incidentally, an example of what a moderate-sized industrial complex can do to stimulate a whole countryside and provide unexpected dividends in indirect employment. Gwalior Rayons Mills, as it is called, provides employment for about 700 people directly. Many of these come from the surrounding countryside, but 290 families, including all the supervisory staff, are housed in a company town on the hillside overlooking the mill and the magnificent sweep of river below it, covered with the yellow booms of bamboo floated down from the hills. In this town there are co-operative stores and a club which provide yet further employment. But the influence of the plant spreads far out into the countryside. Raftmen guide the booms of bamboo down the river, and also, every day, at least a hundred privately owned trucks drive down to the mill from the Ghats, loaded with bamboo obtained from places inaccessible to navigable streams. Apart from the lorry crews, hundreds of men are working in the hills cutting and loading the bamboo. Finally, all the way along the road to the factory little teashops and retail booths have started up which stay open long into the night for the benefit of the lorry drivers. Obviously there are other, less visible ways in which the factory has affected the economy of the surrounding

district, and I would be inclined to accept the estimate given by one of the engineers in charge—that at least five jobs outside the factory were created for every job provided within its actual compound. But, though such instances show how much even a single factory can do to raise the standard of life in the area around it, few Indian capitalists have followed the example of the Tatas and the Birlas and invested in Kerala.

Quite apart from the fear of strikes and their disinclination to pay tribute to the funds of the Communist Party, the lesser industrialists have been impeded by the control which the Central government in Delhi imposes through the Planning Commission on industrial development. The Indian economy, though theoretically socialistic, is in fact a curious marriage of state control and monopoly capitalism, in which the small industrialist finds himself hindered by a mass of regulations which—or so many Indians claim—are interpreted usually in such a way as to favour the great combines, who contribute substantially to Congress Party funds and in return expect to be protected from competition in regions and industries where they have special interests. In particular there is an irksome licensing system under which no new factory or extension to a factory can be built without permission of the authorities in Delhi. The Kerala State Industrial Development Corporation, set up by the local government to encourage the establishment of new industries in the region, finds that a great deal of its time is spent in the difficult task of obtaining licences for interested industrialists; often the licences are refused without explanation or are granted so tardily, through the bureaucratic obstructionism which the Indian civil service has inherited from the British, that the prospective investors have lost interest.

The power to inhibit industrial development through restricting licences and quotas is, however, only the negative aspect of the role played by the Central government in the development or —as Keralans would have it—the non-development of industry on the Malabar Coast. Industrial development throughout India has, since independence, been carried out within the framework of the successive Five Year Plans, to which the Central govern-

ment, which controls most taxation revenue, has made the largest financial contributions, with the state governments contributing according to their ability and private capitalists according to their inclination. In the case of Kerala the contribution of the state government, already committed to the most costly (per capita) education and health programmes in India, could not be high, while we have seen the reasons for reluctance on the part of private investors. In such a situation the responsibility of the Central government to provide substantial support was great; such support would have encouraged the private investors, and it would have acknowledged the special needs of Kerala which were apparent to Ramaswamy Aiyar as early as the 1930's.

The policy actually adopted by Delhi showed an extraordinary combination of economic short-sightedness and political stupidity. During the First and Second Five Year Plans the industrial needs of Kerala were almost completely ignored. Though the population of the state is approximately 4 per cent that of India as a whole, the Central government, in this first ten years of planned economic development, was willing to devote to its industries *less than a quarter of 1 per cent* of the allocation for India as a whole, and only about one-thirtieth of the industrial investment it made during the same period in the neighbouring state of Madras. By the end of the decade Keralans were beginning to feel that the Central government and the Congress leaders in Delhi were interested only in the large amounts of foreign exchange which the state could earn, and that they were deliberately trying to keep it in the condition of a colonial territory devoted to exploitation for the purposes of export, as the British and Dutch and Portuguese had done before them. This feeling contributed notably to the political unrest of the time.

The Third Five Year Plan was a great deal more profuse in promises, though even now the intentions of the Central government bore little relation to Kerala's special needs, since the state in India most in need of industrialization was allowed only a 2 per cent share of the country's total allocation. As the Third Plan drew to a close it became clear that even these meagre pro-

mises would not be kept; only two-thirds of the planned works had been carried out, and nothing at all had been done about the shipyard at Cochin which was the industrial showpiece of the Third Plan so far as Kerala was concerned. Even so, the fact of a comparative increase in Central government expenditure on industry in Kerala had aroused the confidence of at least some private investors, with the result that enterprises and individuals from Kerala, from greater India and even from Commonwealth countries like Canada, established several major factories and a considerable number of smaller plants, largely dependent on the major undertakings. As a result, a new diversification appeared in Keralan industry, and small-scale industries, scattered in the towns and villages, for the first time became an important element in the economy. But all this, which in terms of employment meant all told between 40,000 and 50,000 new jobs, only touched the edges of Kerala's great problem, which, according to a recent survey of the National Council of Applied Economic Research, is to find at least 1,780,000 new full-time jobs by 1970, as well as to provide out-of-season work for the millions of underemployed.

Now India is going into the Fourth Five Year Plan. Again, there is a vast disparity between what Kerala expected and what the Central government is willing to give. In the preliminary memorandum which it issued in February 1965, the Kerala state government hopefully suggested that, to make up for past deficiencies, the contribution of the Central government should be substantially increased to 130 crores of rupees (about £62,000,000), which, with roughly the equivalent amount of investment from the state government and private resources combined, would for the first time make a substantial breakthrough in Keralan industrial development. This calculation did not, of course, take into account such schemes as the Cochin shipyard, which it was expected would be completed in the Third Five Year Plan. Now, however, after passing through the hands of the Planning Commission, the Fourth Plan has emerged with a mere 58 crores of rupees (£27,000,000) as the Central government's investment in Keralan industry, this to include the

38. One of the many power-driven boats which are changing the character of fishing in Kerala

39. A village coir factory: spinning the yarn

40. Kathakali actors in costumes for female (L) and male (R) roles

41. The cashew-nut industry: women workers husking the nuts

Cochin shipyard and other important projects promised for the Third Five Year Plan and not completed.

It is not surprising that Keralans in general continue to feel resentful at what they regard as discrimination, particularly when they compare the meagre treatment they receive with the generosity meted out to neighbouring Madras, home state of the Congress king-maker, Kamaraj. Even the local Congress leaders realize that the political ground is being steadily cut from under their feet by the actions of the party's high command in Delhi, and the most conservative business men are as discontented as the most radical Communists. It was from the officials of one of the largest Chambers of Commerce in the state that I heard the argument that, if Kerala had been able to make use of all the foreign exchange it has earned over the eighteen years since independence, its problem of creating a balanced economy would by now have been solved. One prominent merchant went so far as to defend Ramaswamy Aiyar's idea of an independent Travancore as a visionary plan which the Malayalis had rejected to their cost. Few Keralans would go so far in disaffection; the DMK Party, which advocated a separate Dravidian land in South India until such propaganda was declared illegal by the Central government, never had any success in Kerala, though it still enjoys considerable popularity among the Tamils of Madras. Most Malayalis realize that, for better or worse, their fate is now that of India, and the escape they seek from their situation is not, therefore, secession, but some radical solution to their economic problems, and in seeking that solution they are ready to go to somewhat dramatic extremes.

That the grievances of the Keralans are justified is open to no doubt. That their own particular temper is partly to blame seems also true. The almost incredible neglect of Keralan industry by the Delhi Cabinet and the Planning Commission for the past fifteen years is a matter of plain fact, which even K. P. Madhaven Nair, former secretary of the All-India Congress Committee, the intimate of Shastri and probably the most orthodox Congress man in all Kerala, admitted freely when he talked to me. The journalists from outside the state whom I encountered

during my stay were equally firm in their agreement that Kerala had in fact been treated by the Central government as a kind of unwelcome stepchild.

Many reasons were suggested for this neglect, and there is no doubt that its causes are complex. Kerala, as I have already remarked, is geographically remote from the centres of industrial and financial power in India; and politically its relationship to India as a whole has been not merely uninfluential but even, in view of the series of presidential administrations, positively colonial. The only really dynamic Keralan in the Congress Party is V. P. Krishna Menon, and he has long severed his links with his native region. In the Lok Sabha, India's House of Commons, Kerala has a mere 19 seats out of more than 500, and these are equally divided between Congress and Communist representatives, so that even in parliament Kerala does not speak with a single voice. President's Rule existed in Trivandrum during the extremely complex negotiations that went on early in 1966 at the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's appointment to the Prime Ministership, and so there was no Chief Minister of Kerala to sell his support in return for regional benefits as the other state leaders did at the time. Finally, the failure of Congress in Kerala to establish an enduring equilibrium between communal interests has both exhausted the movement locally and reduced its power to negotiate effectively in national terms. 'Other Congress leaders go to Delhi to demand benefits for their states,' a Madrasi journalist in Trivandrum remarked to me. 'Kerala Congress leaders go to Delhi to beg Kamaraj to settle their quarrels.'

But the failings of Congress locally do not wholly explain the neglect of Kerala by the Central government. There are at least two other important factors. Congress was built up in British India; its principal leaders and most of its active militants came from regions directly ruled by the Raj, and after independence they expected that their districts would receive more and earlier benefits than the former native states, whose nationalist movements entered the struggle late, if at all. This partly explains why so little attention was paid to Kerala in the formulating of the

first two Five Year Plans. In reaction against this neglect and against the generally poor performance of early Congress governments in Kerala, came the Communist electoral victory of 1957, and what had begun as neglect changed into deliberate discrimination. Since 1947 the Congress Party leadership has developed an extraordinary preoccupation with discipline, and states which do not elect Congress governments can expect not only niggardly treatment when the Five Year Plans are drawn up, but also delays in completing even those projects which are promised to them.

To these political reasons for past failure to proceed vigorously with the industrialization of Kerala, must now be added the peculiar difficulties which a series of inadequate harvests has recently imposed upon India, and which have come, unfortunately, at a time when Congress appears to have contemplated a change in its Keralan policy. Since the accession of Mrs. Gandhi to the Prime Ministership, there have been signs that the central command of the party is at last appreciating the arguments of those local leaders who have warned repeatedly that, if Kerala continues to be neglected, it will become a chronic centre of discontent from which Communism will spread to other parts of South India. In July, Mrs. Gandhi made a personal tour of Kerala. In October, for the first time since independence, the All India Congress Committee held its annual gathering in the state, and all the great figures of India's governing party came flying in to the little airport of Cochin, to take part in great elephant-led processions through Ernakulam, and to make what —in view of the elections due in February 1967—were virtually campaign speeches, promising another look at the economic situation in Kerala and an accelerated pattern of industrialization. Unfortunately, in India's present economic situation, with food having a prime claim on foreign exchange, and with the scars of successive conflicts with China and Pakistan still unhealed, it is now much more difficult than it would have been a decade ago to initiate a speedy and effective programme for balancing the Keralan economy.

In any case, political events and economic progress are still

in constant interaction within the general Keralan situation, and much will depend on the results of the elections of 1967, which will already have taken place by the time this book is published. As I write these last pages, at the end of November 1966, the two main opposing forces appear to be fairly evenly balanced. The 1965 elections, and the general trends since that time, suggest that Communist strength has declined in the south, in Cochin and Travancore; the worsening of conditions in the coir industry has cast discredit on the Communist-led unions, and Alleppey is no longer a party stronghold, while support for the party has declined in the Quilon and Trivandrum districts. At the same time, Communist strength appears to have grown in Malabar. Many of the younger Moplahs are discontented with the role of the Moslem League as a purely communal party which can never hope to achieve power except as the lesser member of a coalition, and the 1965 election showed a considerable transfer of votes, not to Congress, which all the Keralan Moslems regard as a communal alliance of Christians and Hindus, but to the Left Communists.

If only the two main parties were contesting the elections, Congress, which will undoubtedly put up a hard electoral fight, would probably win. But between a quarter and a third of the popular vote is likely to go once again to the lesser parties, and for this reason the question of electoral alliances becomes important. Already the Left and Right Communists have formed a United Front which also includes the Samyutka Socialists and the smaller Revolutionary and Kerala Socialist parties, who between them control enough followers to have a decisive effect in certain Travancore constituencies. In Malabar the Moslem League is also part of the alliance; it is the only way that party can prevent its position from being completely eroded by the growing influence of Communism in the Moplah villages.

The Praja Socialists and the dissident Kerala Congress stand aside from this anti-Congress alliance, while the Moslem League is still only loosely attached and could be wooed away by a friendly approach on the part of Congress. An alliance of these four groups might conceivably defeat the Communist-Socialist

United Front. But, for the present at least, the Congress leaders are following a narrowly partisan line. They refuse to consider an alliance with the Kerala Congress because they regard this group bitterly as a heretical schism which must be disciplined before its members can be allowed back into the fold, and they hope that soon the isolation in which Kerala Congress exists on the far right of the political spectrum may be too difficult for its supporters to maintain; in recent months a few Kerala Congress leaders have actually returned to orthodoxy and forgiveness, but there seems no prospect that the two Congress movements as such will come together before the election. As for the Moslem League, Congress still refuses to regard this party as anything more than a communal organization, and with such organizations it does not, according to its leaders, make alliances; this stand blandly ignores the extent to which, in India as a whole, Congress itself has fallen under the influence of Hindu communalism. As for the Praja Socialist Party, it has never forgiven the Congress leaders for their betrayal of earlier alliances, and is likely to take a purist minority line, allied to neither the Communist-dominated United Front nor to any last-minute alliance that Congress may possibly establish.

The alternatives the election of 1967 poses are those which are likely to offer themselves to Kerala for the foreseeable future, and for this reason they are worth considering without committing oneself to any firm prophecy as to the actual pattern which voting will follow.

Should the Left Communists win an absolute majority, which their present weakness in Travancore and Cochin makes no more than remotely possible, then the lines between state government and Central government will be clearly drawn. Delhi will do its best to put a financial and economic stranglehold on the Keralan government; Central government sponsored projects under the Fourth Five Year Plan will be slowed down, and private investors will need no encouragement to boycott Keralan industries. Lacking funds, owing to the restriction of state taxation rights, the Communist government will once again attempt a few inadequate reforms while discontent builds up,

and then, as in 1959, the Central government will give encouragement to manifestations of protest by the opposing parties. Any plausible excuse—such as the needs of national security—will be used to dismiss the Ministry as quickly as possible and to impose Presidential Rule.

Should the election be indecisive, with the balance of power shared by half-a-dozen minor parties, which at present seems the most likely possibility, there will follow a period of vigorous bargaining in which pre-election alliances and pre-election declarations of independence will alike be ignored. A coalition government will emerge, dominated by either the Communists or Congress. If Keralan politicians have learnt nothing from the past, neither coalition will stand much chance of surviving for more than a year or two. If it is a coalition of the Left, it will be subjected to the same pressures from Delhi as a Communist government, though every effort will be made to woo the smaller parties away by promises of preferment. If it is a coalition of the Right-Centre, including a reunited Congress Party, the Moslem League and the Praja Socialists, its life will be prolonged by cautious economic assistance from the Central government, though the high command of Congress will find it difficult to patch up the party quarrels which—again if the past of Keralan politics can be taken as a precedent—will quickly break out. Either kind of coalition seems likely to lead, perhaps even more rapidly than a Communist government, to the imposition of Presidential Rule and Kerala's return to a colonial status *vis-à-vis* the rest of India.

Should Congress win an absolute majority—and this was a possibility which few members of that party took seriously when I left Kerala in the spring of 1966—then it seems likely that the Central government, with its new awareness of the national importance of Keralan politics, will mediate any communal disputes of the kind that split Congress stage governments in the past before they reach catastrophic importance, and will also do its best, within the present difficult all-Indian situation, to make sure that at least the present promises of industrial development are kept.

This last seems the only choice that, within the foreseeable future, can offer Kerala any real hope of the kind of economic reorganization necessary to overcome its peculiarly acute problems of over-population, underemployment and chronic food shortage. Much as one may understand the enthusiasms and discontents that attach so many Keralans to the various parties of the Left, the fact is that in India as a whole the future seems to run for the next crucial decade with the Congress Party; and for this reason Kerala's welfare, as a state particularly vulnerable because of its shortage of both material resources and of influence in the councils of the ruling party, is dependent on the will of Congress to help the Malayali people to help themselves. The Communists have at best a distant future, and the small Socialist factions, the Moslem League and the local Congress schismatics who win the support of so many Keralan individualists and communalists have no future at all except as self-perpetuating minorities.

Now that the Central government is at last showing a more constructive concern over the affairs of Kerala than it displayed in the past, the ideal political situation would be produced by a Congress government with a marginal majority to keep it cohesive and active, and a large and highly critical minority representing every opposition point of view. In this way, with every by-election a crucial test of the government's achievements and its powers of survival, Kerala might look to a period of constructive change, reasonably financed by a nervous administration in Delhi, and yet retaining the benefits of the individual viewpoints and the political excitement which come naturally to the Malayali.

These are very tentative suggestions of the possibilities which the future may hold for Kerala. Profound economic changes are bound to happen in the next few years, and if they are not to take the downward direction which leads to growing misery and discontent, all the adaptability and intelligence of the Malayali people, all the wisdom of its intellectuals, all the goodwill and shrewdness of which Indian and Keralan politicians are capable will be needed. The approach to a balanced economy

will, as and when it takes place, involve a much closer integration into the general Indian pattern than had been possible in the past, but this does not mean a submergence of whatever is unique in Kerala and its people. Politically far more centralized than its nominally federal constitution suggests, and tending of necessity towards increasing economic unification, India remains in social and religious terms as pluralistic as it ever was in the medieval past, and the traditional aspects of Keralan life which make it so distinctive, the heritage of that long succession of travellers and conquerors, from the Nairs and the Nambudiris and the Greeks down to the British, who departed a mere twenty years ago, are likely to remain.

It will still be a little fatherland with its own language and culture whose people will long when they are away to return to the green palmgroves set between blue waters and blue sky. It will remain the corner of India which provides the highest proportion of university graduates and also the highest proportion of sannyasins. The Syrian chants will continue to echo in its great white churches, and the gold-caparisoned elephants to lead the noisy processions from its painted temples. The cry of the bearded pilgrims will echo on the jungle paths to the shrine of Aiyappan, the favourite god of the Malayalis, and good king Mahabali and his Golden Age will still be remembered every Onam feast day with ziggurats of flowers and the dancing of young women. The beat of drums on the perfumed evening air will usher in the epic fantasies of Kathakali, and the presses will still pound away producing newspapers for the coolies' teashops and printing books for the writers' co-operatives. And the traveller who comes over the Ghats or down the coast from outer India with the old romantic name of the Malabar Coast stirring in his mind will find, as all his predecessors have done, a luxuriant man-shaped landscape, interlaced by endless shadowy waterways, a natural orderliness of life in the immense dispersed villages, and, despite adversity, a general mental awareness among its dark sharp-eyed people which is unique in India and perhaps in all South Asia.

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